

PERSPECTIVES ON AMY BEACH'S THREE BROWNING SONGS

A CREATIVE PROJECT

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## Introduction

Amy Marcy Cheney Beach (1867-1944) is perhaps the most prominent female composer of the United States in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, considered a “real American composer” based on both her training and environment.<sup>1</sup> Her compositional style and prominence in the American art song canon were influenced by many aspects of her youth and early career, including her upbringing in New England, training as a pianist, and lack of early formal composition training.

Born Amy Marcy Cheney in Henniker, New Hampshire, Beach showed early signs of becoming a musical prodigy and began taking piano lessons with her mother at age six.<sup>2</sup> Beach’s initial study as a pianist informed much of her compositional technique, particularly her art songs with their striking accompaniment and romantic style. Her first teacher, Carl Baermann was an accomplished musician and a former pupil and friend of Franz Liszt, whose works would later become one of Beach’s foremost compositional influences.<sup>3</sup> Baermann and her later teachers, Ernst Perabo and Junious Hill, focused only on the piano, rather than composition.<sup>4</sup> Hill taught her some harmony, but her formal study of the subject was limited.<sup>5</sup> Her education in harmony and composition primarily came from her translations of the works of Hector Berlioz and François-Auguste Gevaert at the recommendation of composer, conductor, and mentor Wilhelm Gericke. It was through this independent study that the foundation of her compositional technique was formed.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Burnet C. Tuthill, “Mrs. H. H. A. Beach,” *The Musical Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (1940): 306.

<sup>2</sup> Walter S. Jenkins, *The Remarkable Mrs. Beach, American Composer* (Michigan: Harmonie Park Press, 1994), 7.

<sup>3</sup> Adrienne Fried Block, *Amy Beach, Passionate Victorian: The Life and Work of an American Composer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 28.

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas E. Tawa, *The Coming of Age of American Art Music: New England’s Classical Romanticists* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1991), 178.

<sup>5</sup> Tuthill, “Mrs. H. H. A. Beach,” 299.

<sup>6</sup> Tawa, *Coming of Age*, 178.

Beach's songs, especially her Opus 44, *Three Browning Songs*, remain popular amongst singers due to her success during her lifetime. This success was impacted by a number of advantages that she had over other women composers in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. One of these advantages was her marriage in 1885 to Dr. Henry Harris Aubrey Beach, a higher class, wealthy man who encouraged her to continue in her musical pursuits.<sup>7</sup> From this point forward, she would use her married name, Mrs. H. H. A. Beach, in her professional life.<sup>8</sup> Dr. Beach's professional distinction and social acceptance in the community were transferred to his wife, and as a result Beach became connected with the upper class in Boston.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, Beach was well-served by the women's rights movements of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century that challenged traditional beliefs in the cultural inferiority of women and uplifted women in various spheres of cultural life, especially in music.<sup>10</sup> The unusual encouragement of her husband to continue performing and advocacy for women in music during her lifetime contributed to her success and set her apart from other women composers of the day.

In considering her extensive list of compositions throughout her lifetime, Beach is perhaps best known for her over 150 art songs. Beach considered songwriting a respite from her larger, more demanding works.<sup>11</sup> In fact, the songs themselves were written very quickly, typically within a few hours. The songwriting process itself took longer, with a long period in which Beach would study and memorize the poem before considering compositional aspects

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<sup>7</sup> Block, *Amy Beach: Passionate Victorian*, 41; Jenkins, *The Remarkable Mrs. Beach*, 14.

<sup>8</sup> Jenkins, *The Remarkable Mrs. Beach*, 14.

<sup>9</sup> Block, *Amy Beach: Passionate Victorian*, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Adrienne Fried Block, "Why Amy Beach Succeeded as a Composer: The Early Years," *Current Musicology* no. 36 (1983): 41.

<sup>11</sup> Block, *Amy Beach: Passionate Victorian*, 58.

such as melody and harmony.<sup>12</sup> By 1900, when her *Three Browning Songs* were published, critics deemed her one of the foremost song composers in America.<sup>13</sup>

### ***Three Browning Songs, Opus 44***

The *Three Browning Songs*, based on three poems by Robert Browning, were commissioned by the Browning Society of Boston for a celebration of the poet's birthday.<sup>14</sup> A contemporary review of the songs noted that, "all are singable as well as playable; and hearable too ... modulation is rarely employed so discreetly and at the same time with such poetic effect as in many places in these songs,"<sup>15</sup> which may have been the reason for their popularity with both singers and audiences. The songs provide challenges for the singers, but are still approachable and manageable. Each song lends itself to expressivity and numerous interpretive choices due to the musical connection to the text. As Beach herself stated, "it is the poem which gives the song its shape, its mood, its rhythm, its very being."<sup>16</sup> The popularity of the songs has caused them to be performed and recorded by a variety of artists, and differences can be heard in each interpretation; however, at their core, performance practice of the *Three Browning Songs* remains consistent in their romantic style and text expression.

Stylistically, the *Three Browning Songs* reflect the romantic characteristics present in all of Beach's works. Beach's compositions are intensely emotional, with emotional expression as the overall goal.<sup>17</sup> Her major influences were romantic composers such as Brahms,

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 147.

<sup>13</sup> Tawa, *Coming of Age*, 180.

<sup>14</sup> Block, *Amy Beach, Passionate Victorian*, 150.

<sup>15</sup> Tuthill, "Mrs. H. H. A. Beach," 302.

<sup>16</sup> Myrna G. Eden, *Energy and Individuality in the Art of Anna Huntington, Sculptor, and Amy Beach, Composer* (New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1987): 133.

<sup>17</sup> Tawa, *Coming of Age*, 180.

Rachmaninoff, Liszt, and MacDowell.<sup>18</sup> Some of her signatures included trills and tremolos; chromatic scales, which were typically used as either a cadenza or to increase harmonic ambiguity; and octaves, which were often used to make the piano sound more orchestral.<sup>19</sup> All of these elements can be heard in the *Three Browning Songs*.

Beach's key choices were informed by her synesthesia. Synesthesia is the "involuntary response of one sensory experience with another" – in Beach's case, associating certain keys with certain colors.<sup>20</sup> Beach was very particular about the key of each of her songs.<sup>21</sup> Beach was also adamant about unauthorized transpositions, as she necessitated that they remain in a key associated with the correct color to match the song's poetry.<sup>22</sup> The *Three Browning Songs* were examples of these key/color associations – both "The Year's at the Spring" and "I send my heart up to thee" were originally published in D-flat major, associated with purple or violet, while "Ah, Love, but a Day" was originally published in A-flat major, which is associated with the color blue.<sup>23</sup>

#### *"The Years at the Spring"*

As one of her most popular songs, Beach's setting of "The Year's at the Spring" was often performed by her contemporaries such as Emma Eames, Mrs. Carl Alves, and Eileen Farrel.<sup>24</sup> The piece's bright and upbeat nature made it a favorite for performers and audiences alike. "The Year's at the Spring" is based on a portion of Browning's poem "Pippa Passes" from the 1841 collection *Bells and Pomegranates*. "Pippa Passes" tells the story of a poor Italian girl

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<sup>18</sup> Brown, *Amy Beach and her Chamber Music*, 131.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 135-6.

<sup>20</sup> Jeremy Logan, "Synesthesia and Feminism: A Case Study on Amy Beach (1867-1944)," *New Sound* 46, no. 2 (2015): 132.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 134

<sup>22</sup> Jenkins, *The Remarkable Mrs. Beach*, 125.

<sup>23</sup> Logan, "Synesthesia and Feminism," 136-8.

<sup>24</sup> Brown, *Amy Beach and Her Chamber Music*, 134.

who works all year but has one holiday on New Year's Day. The poem expresses young Pippa's excitement at the opportunity to celebrate and her optimistic outlook on the new year.<sup>25</sup> The original verse reads:

The year's at the spring,  
 And day's at the morn;  
 Morning's at seven;  
 The hill-side's dew-pearled;  
 The lark's on the wing;  
 The snail's on the thorn;  
 God's in his Heaven—  
 All's right with the world!<sup>26</sup>

Consistent with her usual compositional process, Beach described that the song came to her “ready-made” after a long period of considering the poem.<sup>27</sup> Beach composed the song on a train – as she sat and considered the text, the rhythm came to her inspired by the rhythm of the train's wheels, before turning to melody. Of its composition, Beach explained: “I listened to the melody – it was the only melody, after that, for that burst of joy and faith. I wrote it down as soon as I got home.”<sup>28</sup> This was her usual quick compositional process that followed a long meditation on the poetry.

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<sup>25</sup> Eden, *Energy and Individuality*, 133.

<sup>26</sup> Robert Browning, *Pippa Passes* (England: William Heinemann, 1906): 25.

<sup>27</sup> Eden, *Energy and Individuality*, 134.

<sup>28</sup> Block, *Amy Beach, Passionate Victorian*, 150.

“The Year’s at the Spring” is emotionally static, making one long emotional statement throughout its 29 measures.<sup>29</sup> Beach scholar Adrienne Fried Block describes the piece as a “single emotional sweep,” with one emotion that builds through *accelerando* and *crescendo* into a climax.<sup>30</sup> This poses an interpretive challenge for the singer, as the piece remains static throughout. However, the short length of the song helps keep the performance engaging. Additionally, the primary emotion is excitement, which is bolstered by the musical elements of the piece such as the fast tempo, triplet accompaniment, and short phrase lengths, and therefore keeps the energy high.

The song is in binary form and only 29 measures, taking less than one minute to perform. The first section is only 9 measures long, while the second section, beginning in measure 10, comprises the last 20 measures. Despite the disparity in length, there are parallels between the two sections. Each section begins with the text, “The year’s at the spring; and day’s at the morn” and ends with includes a meter shift from 3/4 to 4/4 in the measure before the final cadence. This can be seen in m. 7 (Example 1) and m. 25 (Example 2), respectively. These meter changes align with the most climatic moments in the song.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Tawa, *Coming of Age*, 181.

<sup>30</sup> Block, *Amy Beach, Passionate Victorian*, 151.

<sup>31</sup> Tawa, *Coming of Age*, 181.

Example 1: Amy Beach, *Three Browning Songs*, “The Year’s at the Spring,” mm. 7-9<sup>32</sup>

Example 1 shows a musical score for measures 7-9 of "The Year's at the Spring" from Amy Beach's *Three Browning Songs*. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. The vocal line (treble clef) has lyrics "hill - - side's dew - pearled;". The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a dense chordal texture in the right hand and a more active bass line. Performance markings include *poco rall.*, *a tempo*, and *rit.*. The piano part includes dynamic markings *f* and *p*, and a *rit.* marking. There are also some performance instructions like *Ad.* and *\* Ad.* in the bass line.

Example 2: Amy Beach, *Three Browning Songs*, “The Year’s at the Spring,” mm. 25-29<sup>33</sup>

Example 2 shows a musical score for measures 25-29 of "The Year's at the Spring" from Amy Beach's *Three Browning Songs*. The score is in G major and 4/4 time. The vocal line (treble clef) has lyrics "right with the world!". The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a dense chordal texture in the right hand and a more active bass line. Performance markings include *rit.*, *a tempo*, and *rit.*. The piano part includes dynamic markings *f* and *p*, and a *rit.* marking. There are also some performance instructions like *Ad.* and *\* Ad.* in the bass line.

The rhythmic change at the end of each section is less of a challenge for the singer than for the pianist, as each of these changes occur on a long, held pitch in the melody. In the second section, the rhythmic change actually assists in text expression as the added beat allows the phrase “all’s right with the world” in mm. 25-27 (Example 2) to naturally slow along with the written ritardando, allowing for expression and emphasis on this phrase that aligns with the most

<sup>32</sup> Amy Beach, *Op. 44, Three Browning Songs, High Voice* (Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1900): 2.

<sup>33</sup> Beach, *Op. 44, Three Browning Songs*, 3.

important line of the poetry. Harmonically, the song begins and ends in D-flat major, with only a brief shift to the chromatic mediant on the climactic phrase, “God’s in his heaven, All’s right with the world” in mm. 19-21 (Example 3).<sup>34</sup>

Melodically, there is a recurring motif of an upward leap of a fourth that appears in both the vocal line and the accompaniment.<sup>35</sup> Beach’s vocal melodies are characterized by disjunct motion, with a frequent change of direction in the contour of the melody. Leaps of fourths and sevenths are the most common, along with use of dissonant intervals and octaves leaps on the final note of the phrase. Melodies are also extremely chromatic, and often tonally ambiguous when separated from the harmonies. In many cases, when melody is separated from the accompaniment, it is challenging to determine the key of the song. Finally, as is exemplified in “The Year’s at the Spring,” her vocal melodies rarely begin on the downbeat.<sup>36</sup>

The majority of the vocal phrases are only two bars, with slightly longer four bar phrases at the climax of each section; these short phrases throughout the song give it a sense of breathlessness.<sup>37</sup>

The primary challenges in performing this piece lie in the fast tempo and beginning of phrases on the upbeat. Rhythmic challenges abound throughout the piece, as Beach often makes use of triplets and two against three, which are two of her signature traits. Beach often uses tempo changes as a means for contrast between sections of a piece. In terms of rhythm, cross rhythms, uneven groupings, and syncopations often appear. The most common cross-rhythm is

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<sup>34</sup> Eden, *Energy and Individuality*, 135.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 151.

two against three, and more broadly triplets are one of Beach's stylistic hallmarks. Repeated rhythmic motifs are also common in her works.<sup>38</sup>

*Example 3: Amy Beach, Three Browning Songs, "The Year's at the Spring," mm. 19-21*<sup>39</sup>

As most phrases begin on the upbeat, the initial pitch serves as an anacrusis leading to the downbeat.<sup>40</sup> These rhythms are used to emphasize particular words in the text, with the most important words occurring at the end of the phrase on the downbeat, and with a sustained pitch. In order to accurately interpret the text, the singer typically must emphasize the second note of the phrase which falls on the beat, rather than the first note which is typically an anacrusis to the phrase. Additionally, the use of triplets and two against three rhythms throughout are one of the most challenging aspects of the piece, as rhythmic clarity is often lost in the fast tempo. The tessitura of the original key is also somewhat of a challenge, as many of the longer pitches occur in the *passaggio* and the singer must have consistent breath energy to maintain pitch.

The accompaniment is primarily comprised of triplets that add to the sense of buoyancy throughout the song and emphasize the fast tempo.<sup>41</sup> While the tempo aligns well with the

<sup>38</sup> Brown, *Amy Beach and her Chamber Music*, 150.

<sup>39</sup> Beach, *Op. 44, Three Browning Songs*, 3.

<sup>40</sup> Block, *Amy Beach, Passionate Victorian*, 151.

<sup>41</sup> Eden, *Energy and Individuality*, 135-6.

excited nature of the text, it leaves little time for pauses between phrases and therefore breaths must be intentional and phrases are easier when they are longer. For example, in m. 14 (Example 4), the singer must choose between a two or four bar phrase by deciding whether or not to breathe after “the lark’s on the wing.” Two-bar phrases would be consistent with the previous four measures, but a four-bar phrase allows a legato line and consistent breath flow.

Additionally, due to the fast tempo, breaking the phrase midway through may cause the tempo to drag in order to fit in a breath. If the singer chooses to breathe in m. 14, they must be conscious of the rhythm and make sure that they are not behind in the second two bars of the phrase. The fast tempo also makes diction a challenge, as it is often difficult to maintain clarity of text at such a rapid pace without sacrificing breath line and legato.

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*“Ah, Love, but a Day”*

The second of the *Three Browning Songs* is “Ah, Love, but a Day,” with text from Browning’s poem *James Lee’s Wife*. Critics considered this piece, along with “The Year’s at the Spring,” some of the best contributions to the art song repertory.<sup>42</sup> The song uses the first two

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<sup>42</sup> Eden, *Energy and Individuality*, 133.

stanzas of the first part of Browning's poem, on the topic of the anxieties associated with the potential loss of the narrator's husband's love.<sup>43</sup> Browning's original two stanzas read:

**I.**

Ah, Love, but a day

    And the world has changed!

The sun's away,

    And the bird estranged;

The wind has dropped,

    And the sky's deranged

Summer has stopped.

Look in my eyes!

Wilt thou change too?

Should I fear surprise?

    Shall I find aught new

In the old and dear,

    In the good and true,

With the changing year?<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>44</sup> Robert Browning, *The Poems and Plays of Robert Browning* (New York: The Modern Library, 1934), 264.

Beach chooses to repeat lines in her setting that are not repeated in the original poem to emphasize certain aspects of the text.<sup>45</sup> The song expresses an intensity and depth of emotion through its musical elements that mirror the poetry.<sup>46</sup>

Although Beach chooses to repeat numerous lines, each repetition is ascribed a musical component to distinguish it from the previous repetition. The first phrase from mm. 1-6 is piano, while the repetition of this text from mm. 7-10 are mezzo forte. In mm. 15-20, with the repetition of “summer has stopped,” not only does Beach incorporate dynamic changes with a diminuendo to pianissimo, but she also writes in a ritardando in the second phrase. Following this section, the third repetition of the opening text at mm. 21-25 begins forte with a diminuendo to pianissimo, as well as another *ritenuto molto* in m. 23, all of which contrast the static dynamics and tempi of the first two phrases.

In the second section, Beach repeats the phrase “look in my eyes” in mm. 27-28, mm. 31-32, mm. 42-43, and mm. 44-45, yet each repetition is different, with its own rhythms and pitches, as well as dynamics and tempo markings. The first two iterations are pianissimo, while the second is marked *dolcissimo*. The third is forte and *sostendudo* with a diminuendo on “eyes” in m. 43, and the final version has a ritardando marked and another diminuendo in m. 45. In each of these cases of repeated text, the nuance in tempo, dynamics, pitch, and rhythmic content are all integral to differentiating the meaning of each phrase. The differences between each inform how the singer interprets and expresses the text, and it is therefore important not only to pay close attention to what is marked in the score, but also to ensure that that these markings are reflected in their performance.

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<sup>45</sup> Victoria Malawey, “Strophic Modification in Songs by Amy Beach,” *Music Theory Online* 20, no. 4 (2014): 33.

<sup>46</sup> Tawa, *Coming of Age*, 181.

Beach's songs typically use ternary form, but it is often challenging to determine distinct sections. Other often used forms include binary and modified strophic.<sup>47</sup> The form of "Ah, love, but a Day" is complex, and can be interpreted as either binary or modified strophic. The interpretation primarily relies on the emphasis of the listener – if the emphasis is on harmony and texture, the piece appears to be in binary form, but if the emphasis is on melody, it may instead be interpreted as a modified strophic form with two strophes.<sup>48</sup> For example, melodic features of mm. 26-37 resemble the earlier melody of mm. 3-13, and the same is true for mm. 41-48 and mm. 15-19. However, there is a stark shift in texture, with a rhythmically denser accompaniment in the second half and change in modality from major to minor.<sup>49</sup> The biggest departure from strophic form that points to a binary interpretation is in mm. 38-41 at the climax of the song (Example 4). This section incorporates completely new material, with text re-inserted from the first stanza that does not occur in the original poem.<sup>50</sup> Regardless of how the singer chooses to interpret the form, there are clearly two main sections that express two different emotions. The first section or strophe sets up a more general atmosphere of despair and acknowledgement of the changing world, while the second section or strophe leans into the anxiety through an agitated texture with the added triplets in the accompaniment.

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<sup>47</sup> Brown, *Amy Beach and her Chamber Music*, 161-2.

<sup>48</sup> Malawey, "Strophic Modification," 37.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

Example 4: Amy Beach, *Three Browning Songs*, “Ah, Love, but a Day,” mm. 37-43<sup>51</sup>

The image displays a musical score for the song "Ah, Love, but a Day" by Amy Beach, measures 37-43. The score is presented in three systems. The first system features a vocal line with lyrics "good and true, With the chang-ing year? Ah," and a piano accompaniment. The second system continues the vocal line with lyrics "Love, Look in my eyes, Look in my" and the piano accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (f, ff, dim.), articulation (sostenuto, colla voce), and performance instructions (rit e sempre). The piano part is marked with "Ped." and asterisks, indicating pedaling instructions.

Harmonically, Beach’s songs are characterized by extreme chromaticism and rapidly changing tonal centers. These shifts in tonal center are often so rapid that the first key is not yet fully established before moving on to the next. Beach often avoids using cadences, as well. The most common key area relationships are thirds, and she also often uses diminished chords as a bridge between tonal centers.<sup>52</sup> As with many of Beach’s songs, “Ah, Love, but a Day” is filled with complex harmony and chromaticism. Beach utilizes suspended tonality and modality as means for text painting throughout the song. Additionally, the lowered tonic is present throughout, adding to the instability of the piece.<sup>53</sup> The song begins in f minor, but the second

<sup>51</sup> Beach, *Op. 44, Three Browning Songs*, 7.

<sup>52</sup> Brown, *Amy Beach and her Chamber Music*, 147.

<sup>53</sup> Eden, *Energy and Individuality*, 140-1.

section or second strophe, depending on interpretation, begins in the parallel major in m. 24.<sup>54</sup> This key change aligns with a change in emotion, too, with the major key expressing the increased energy as the anxiety begins to build. The major key also communicates the intensity of the second half, as the text begins questioning with an urgency not present in the first section. The second half of the text is almost entirely comprised of questions, and this tonal shift is mirrored in both the melodic line and piano accompaniment.

Melodically, Beach creates unity between the two stanzas through repetitions in the first vocal phrase. This repetition also includes repeated rhythms.<sup>55</sup> Melodic intervals throughout the melody are used to highlight certain words – one prominent example of this occurs on the word “love” throughout the song. In the beginning, “love” contains primarily intervals of a 3<sup>rd</sup>, but expands to a 4<sup>th</sup> and later 6<sup>th</sup> as the song progresses as the intensity builds.<sup>56</sup> Chromaticism in both the melodic line and accompaniment is also in keeping with the intensity.<sup>57</sup> This chromaticism can pose a challenge when learning the piece, as without the accompaniment the tonal centers are unclear and the pitches seem unrelated and extremely challenging at times.

Beach also makes use of melodic text painting to express the emotions of the poem. One major example of this is in mm. 16-20, on the phrase “summer has stopped.” In the initial poem, the line of text only appears once; however, Beach repeats the phrase twice. Beach unusually sets the first occurrence of the word “summer” on a weak beat, as this is inconsistent with the poetic meter of the phrase in the poem. The word “summer” is actually repeated thrice, although the phrase itself is only repeated twice.<sup>58</sup> Here, the melodic line literally stops, repeating the same

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<sup>54</sup> Malawey, “Strophic Modification,” 29.

<sup>55</sup> Eden, *Energy and Individuality*, 142.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

<sup>57</sup> Tawa, *Coming of Age*, 181.

<sup>58</sup> Malawey, “Strophic Modification,” 36.

pitch through the end of the phrase.<sup>59</sup> This is perhaps the most blatant example of text painting throughout not only the piece, but the entire song set. However, it is extremely effective, and with a ritardando and decrescendo to pianissimo in the vocal line, the effect underlines the text as everything does come to a stop.

*“I send my heart up to thee”*

The third song of the *Three Browning Songs* is “I send my heart up to thee,” with text taken from Browning’s long poem “In a Gondola” from Browning’s third *Bells and Pomegranates* collection.<sup>60</sup> Although not as famous in Beach’s time, and not as often analyzed or performed as the other two songs in this set, “I send my heart up to thee” still provides value and unique challenges for the singer, and rounds out the set both musically and emotionally. In the original poem, the narrator sings to his lover in a gondola:

*He sings*

I send my heart up to thee, all my heart

In this my singing.

For the stars help me, and the sea bears part;

The very night is clinging

Closer to Venice’ streets to leave one space

Above me, whence thy face

May light my joyous heart to thee its dwelling-place.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Eden, *Energy and Individuality*, 145.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Browning, *Poems and Plays*, 123.

“I send my heart up to thee” is harmonically the least complex of the three songs, in D-flat major throughout with a tonic pedal point in the accompaniment. Beach only occasionally uses chromatic pitches, with some modal color throughout but a primarily diatonic melody.<sup>62</sup> Contemporary critic W.S.B. Matthews used this song as an example in his 1900 description of Beach’s use of discreet yet poetically expressive modulation, writing “at the beginning of the second page, where upon the word “sea” the D-flat changes enharmonically to C-sharp and the next two syllable bring a cadence into the tonic a half-step higher. This modulation is by no means new ... but is done here so nicely and with such delicacy of insight!” (Example 5).<sup>63</sup> In this particular song, Beach’s modulations are used as tools for text painting, as many of them align with either climactic moments in the poem or assist in transitions between sections by providing contrast.

Example 5: Amy Beach, *Three Browning Songs*, “I send my heart up to thee,” mm. 9-10<sup>64</sup>

The image shows a musical score for the song "I send my heart up to thee" by Amy Beach. It consists of a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in the treble clef and the piano accompaniment is in the grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The key signature is D-flat major (two flats). The time signature is 4/4. The score is divided into two systems. The first system covers measures 9 and 10. The vocal line has lyrics "sea" and "bears part,". The piano accompaniment has dynamics *p* and *pp*. The second system covers measures 11 and 12. The piano accompaniment has dynamics *pp* and *dolce marc.*. The score includes a double bar line and a repeat sign.

<sup>62</sup> Eden, *Energy and Individuality*, 148.

<sup>63</sup> Tuthill, “Mrs. H. H. A. Beach,” 302.

<sup>64</sup> Beach, *Op. 44, Three Browning Songs*, 9.

The song is in 9/8 throughout, with an accompaniment made of sweeping broken chords.<sup>65</sup> These ascending arpeggios themselves emphasize the nature of the text, which emphasizes the uplifting nature of love, reaching upwards toward the stars. The vocal melody is comparatively static against the quick-moving accompaniment, and it is therefore necessary for the singer to maintain a consistent melodic line so as to not appear frantic, allowing the piano to drive the energy. The opening of the piece is marked *tranquillo* with a piano dynamic, indicating a quiet and serene opening to the piece that will not build in intensity until the final section.

Beach repeats the opening text twice in succession: first in mm. 1-10, and then again in mm. 11-19. The text is exactly the same, as is the contour of the melody, creating two parallel phrases that only differ slightly in the final four measures. The contrast between the two sections occurs instead in the dynamic shift. The first phrase begins piano but contains a series of small crescendos followed by decrescendos, giving emphasis to particular words that typically occur on the highest pitch of the phrase, specifically “heart” in m. 5 and “stars” in m. 7. In the second repetition, however, there is one steady crescendo throughout that grows to a forte in m. 14 and maintains that dynamic until the end of the phrase, when it decrescendos in m. 18 to pianissimo leading into the next section. These clearly marked and expressive dynamics, much like in the previous song “Ah, Love, but a Day,” provide contrast between the two repetitions of the same text, which encourages differentiation in interpretation between these first two phrases.

The accompaniment changes to sustained chords in m. 20 with a change in the poetry (Example 6).<sup>66</sup> Here, the poem becomes more somber as it references the night, with the phrase, “The very night is clinging.”

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<sup>65</sup> Eden, *Energy and Individuality*, 149.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

Example 6: Amy Beach, *Three Browning Songs*, “I send my heart up to thee,” mm. 19-22<sup>67</sup>

The image displays a musical score for the first two lines of the song. The top system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the first line of text: "part; The ve - ry night is". The vocal line begins with a half note, followed by a quarter rest, then a quarter note with a slur and a second quarter note. The piano accompaniment features a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The second system shows the vocal line and piano accompaniment for the second line of text: "cling - ing Clo - - ser to Ven - ice'". The vocal line has a quarter note, a quarter rest, and a quarter note with a slur and a second quarter note. The piano accompaniment continues with a melodic line in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The score includes dynamic markings such as *pp* and *molto ritardando*, and performance instructions like *ad.* and *molto ritardando*.

However, the accompaniment soon returns to the ascending broken chords, which accompany a harmonic shift to E major in mm. 22-26. This aligns with the text, which here references the “joyous heart” as it shifts back into D-flat major. The melodic line also makes use of a rhythmic change, with duples in both the melodic line and accompaniment that emphasize the text, “light my joyous heart to thee,” before settling back into the triple meter at m. 28 (Example 10). This feeling of settling also aligns with the text, which at mm. 30-31 references “its dwelling place.” The duples in m. 27 are accompanied by a *molto ritardando*, further emphasizing the rhythmic contrast and leading into a surprisingly pianissimo dynamic and a *dolcissimo* marking on the climax of the phrase on an A-flat in m. 28 (Example 7).

<sup>67</sup> Beach, *Op. 44, Three Browning Songs*, 10.

Example 7: Amy Beach, *Three Browning Songs*, “I send my heart up to thee,” mm. 27-28<sup>68</sup>

The image shows a musical score for the first two measures of the song. The vocal line is in treble clef, and the piano accompaniment is in bass clef. The key signature is three flats (B-flat major/D minor). The tempo marking is 'molto rit.' and the dynamic marking is 'pp'. The lyrics are 'light my joy - ous heart to thee,'. The piano accompaniment features triplet block chords and longer held pitches in the melody.

As in the previous songs, both tempo and dynamic markings are key to accurate interpretation of the text and expressivity, particularly as the text is repeated from mm. 32-39. Here, however, the melodic contour and accompaniment shift dramatically, with longer held pitches in the melody and triplet block chords in the accompaniment. Block chords are common throughout Beach’s works, and are reminiscent of Liszt, one of Beach’s main influences.<sup>69</sup>

This new texture, along with an accelerando and crescendo, builds the intensity of the song to the climax in mm. 35-36 as the vocal melody soars to a fortissimo high B-flat on the word “heart.” A legato vocal line is again important in this section, again allowing the piano to move the tempo forward so the singer does not feel or sound rushed. The ascending nature of the melody also poses vocal challenges. Breath control and consistency in legato line can help alleviate some of these challenges for a more fluid and forward-moving vocal line that builds in intensity.

Moving into the final section of the song, Beach again chooses to repeat the opening lines of text that are not repeated in the original poem. Returning to Tempo I in m. 39, the music is

<sup>68</sup> Beach, *Op. 44, Three Browning Songs*, 11.

<sup>69</sup> Brown, *Amy Beach and her Chamber Music* 156.

also marked *sempre più tranquillo*, calming back to its original tempo and energy level.

Although the tempo is slower than in the previous section, in order to maintain energy through the end of the piece the tempo must remain somewhat lively as there is a *rallentando* to come.

The final entrance of the vocal melody in m. 42 is marked *pianissimo*, with a *rallentando* in m. 44 that slows the final three measures.

The end of the piece offers two options for pitches, an octave apart. The original ending takes the lower octave, adding to the calming and tranquil mood indicated in the final phrase. However, many singers choose the higher octave, which maintains a higher energy level. The pitch choice informs the emotional interpretation and expression of this final phrase, and therefore singers must carefully choose which is their desired interpretation and align their choice in pitches thusly.

### **Recording Comparison**

The first of the three recordings to be analyzed in this research is that of Deborah Voight, recorded in 2005. Voight primarily focuses on diction and dynamic contrast in order to emphasize the text of each song. Her version of “The Year’s at the Spring” feels more relaxed, with a slightly slower tempo. In this piece, Voight also employs numerous tempo changes, and takes time with many phrases. She takes a longer pause between m. 14 and m. 15 between “the larks on the wing/the snails on the thorn,” separating them into two phrases rather than combining them into a single phrase. She takes a similar break in the final phrase, in m. 25 between “right/with the world.” These breaths emphasize certain aspects of the text. Additionally, throughout the song, her diction is focused and crisp, and she is very intentional in many of her choices. For example, Voight uses a glottal onset on the word “in” in m. 18 but

when the phrase is repeated in m. 20, she omits the glottal. These strong diction choices to emphasize words are evident in “Ah, Love, but a Day,” too.

One example of emphasizing diction in the second song occurs on the phrase “summer has stopped” in mm. 16-19. The words are repeated twice, but Voight emphasizes the [st] of stopped as the texture of the music and the melodic contour change – the music stops on this phrase to align with what the text is describing. Voight often emphasizes the second iteration of repeated text, which also occurs in m. 30 with the phrase “look in my eyes.” The second appearance of the word “look” has a much stronger [k] than the first. This interpretation aligns with the build in intensity that occurs during this phrase, as well, as Voight relaxes the tempo into the beginning of the phrase but then builds through an *accelerando*, all the way to the climax of the phrase in m. 40. Voight takes ample time in the climax, stretching the phrase and then continuing in the slower tempo through the end. This occurs earlier in the piece, as well, such as in mm. 11-15. Voight adds the intensity through both *accelerando* and *crescendo*, adding a sense of breathlessness to the phrase that builds up until the abrupt “summer has stopped.”

Voight takes a slightly faster tempo on “I send my heart up to thee” and maintains this energy throughout the piece, with less *rubato* in some of the more dramatic phrases. The final phrase, mm. 43-48, typically slows until the end, but Voight keeps the tempo consistent. In fact, throughout this song dynamic contrast is more prevalent than tempo. This is heard in the very first phrase, with accents on “heart” and “stars.” Voight also emphasizes “stars” in m. 7 with her pronunciation of the [st] of stars. The second strophe has less emphasis on the consonants, but instead a beautiful *legato* line that lasts through the end of the piece. In the final phrase, Voight chooses the original setting that ends the melodic line on the lower octave, which feels calm and serene in contrast to the lively opening tempo.

Katherine Kelton's recording of the *Three Browning Songs*, made in 2004, is uniquely colored by her mezzo-soprano voice. As compared to Voight, she has a much darker tone. Her version of "The Year's at the Spring" is taken at a much faster tempo with less rubato throughout; she occasionally slows the tempo a bit but mostly maintains her quick pace. She emphasizes rhythmic contrast, such as in m. 7 where the eighth note of "dew" is remarkably fast. Like Voight, she takes a pause between the phrases in m. 15, but does not take a full breath. Kelton sings the piece in B-flat rather than the original key, and likewise chooses the lower mezzo-soprano keys for the entirety of the set.

"Ah, Love, but a Day" sees similarities in interpretation to "The Year's at the Spring." Kelton has less of an emphasis on diction throughout, although her [a] vowel is much brighter throughout than Voight's. Kelton again uses the rhythms to emphasize the text. This is especially heard in mm. 11-19, and Kelton slows the tempo considerably in mm. 16-19, again emphasizing the text "summer has stopped" as Voight also did. As Kelton approaches the climax, the tempo increases, pausing in m. 33 to break between the phrases, "shall I fear surprise/shall I find aught new" and again in m. 34, pausing between the phrases "in the old and dear/in the good and true." On the climax itself in m. 40, Kelton's tone is lighter and she does not draw out the fermata, but chooses to hold it for a shorter period of time. From then until the end, Kelton's tempo slows considerably, and she dramatically extends the final note on "too" even beyond the piano's accompaniment.

In the third song, "I send my heart up to thee," Kelton uses rubato throughout to emphasize the text, speeding up through the first phrase in mm. 2-6, then slowing through mm. 7-10, before finally relaxing back into the opening tempo at m. 11. She continues this structure throughout, stretching the tempo at the beginning of each phrase, but then accelerating into the

climax, before slowing again as the phrase ends. Contrary to Voight, Kelton opts to go up to the higher octave on the final cadence. This option allows the ending to maintain a higher energy, with a lively tempo through to the end, as Kelton almost rushes through the end. The pitch and tempo choices exude an entirely different energy than Voight's choices.

In consideration of diction, Emma Kirkby's recording, made in 2002, is the furthest removed from the other two interpretations. As an English singer, Kirkby uses British received pronunciation throughout, a choice that seems appropriate given the poet Robert Browning's nationality as well as the singer's own natural accent. However, this is an unusual choice due to Beach's strong association with American musical traditions. Kirkby begins the set in a lovely bright tempo for "The Year's at the Spring," and maintains this quick tempo throughout, only slowing slightly in the transition between the two sections. As she approaches the end of the piece, there is little to no tempo change, aligning with many interpretations of the piece as one continuous emotional sweep rather than dividing it into sections. She approaches the climax at mm. 2-24 very lightly in order to maintain the tempo through to the end.

However, in a stark contrast, Kirkby approaches "Ah, Love, but a Day" at a much slower tempo than the previous two interpretations. She begins each phrase quietly before she crescendos into each word that she emphasizes – such as in mm. 2-10 with an emphasis on "love," "day," "world," and finally "changed." Unlike Kelton's strict adherence to the written rhythm, Kirkby takes a different approach in m. 11, with a true dotted eighth note followed by a sixteenth note on "sun's away," rather than the previous two examples who did not sing a true sixteenth note in this phrase. As she approaches m. 16, Kirkby pulls back in both tempo and dynamic to stop the motion for the phrase "summer has stopped," an approach similar to the previous two. Unlike the others, however, Kirkby employs straight tone in this phrase and others

to emphasize the quiet sections. Kirkby again uses straight tone in the climax of the song in m. 40., on the final repetition of the “Ah, Love” text.

In the third song, “I send my heart up to thee,” Kirkby similarly uses straight tone throughout for a clear and piercing tonal quality. She takes a fast tempo with little to no rubato throughout, maintaining the energy similar to Kelton’s interpretation. Like Voight, Kirkby chooses the lower octave at the end, which lends a calming effect to the end of the piece, finally settling after the previous *accelerando*. Her interpretation maintains more consistency in tempo until the end.

### **Conclusion**

The *Three Browning Songs* are a highlight of Beach’s art song compositions and reflection of her style. They are not too difficult to sing, and yet complex enough to provide a challenge to the singer. The fast tempo, short phrases, and emphasis on the upbeat of “The Year’s at the Spring” pose technical challenges for the singer’s breath and legato phrasing. The chromaticism and complex harmony that allow for such expressive text painting in “Ah, Love, but a Day” are also a challenge for the singer. In “I send my heart up to thee,” the contrast between tempi, dynamics, and energy levels that build to a climax before relaxing into the calm ending can prove challenging in interpretation.

Though Beach’s works, particularly the *Three Browning Songs*, are standard in the art song repertory, analysis reveals that there are nuances in performance practice that allow for interpretive differences between singers. Beach’s highly romantic and emotional compositional style, with its strong connection to the poetry, prominent dynamic contrasts, and harmonic color, all allow the singer many options for expression in their performance. In “The Year’s at the

Spring,” the singer communicates excitement through the fast tempo and driving triplets. This serves as a contrast to the agitation in “Ah, Love, but a Day,” which is again contrasted with the sweeping energy of “I send my heart up to thee.” Additionally, the singer can choose their own interpretation of certain elements, such as form in “Ah, Love, but a Day,” determining whether to emphasize the melodic line and therefore modified strophic form of the piece, or whether the harmonic progression and accompaniment should be taken more heavily into account for an interpretation in ternary form. Throughout all three pieces, choices in interpretation of dynamics and tempo, particularly in repeated text, inform the emotional progression of each song. The repeated text in each of the three pieces also allows for increased expressivity.

The marriage of musical elements and poetry help audiences connect with the songs, while the contrast between the three songs offer three unique opportunities for interpretation. The prevalence of these songs today can be ascribed to Beach’s success as an American composer, in particular her acclaim in art song composition, as well as the nature of the music itself and its appeal to both singers and audiences. Although these popular songs have been often performed, interpreted, and analyzed, there remain potential areas for future study. Future study could include an analysis of Browning’s poetry and its intersection with the compositional choices made in each piece. Additionally, a comparison between these songs, which were composed early in Beach’s career, and her later songs, or between Beach’s style in her instrumental versus vocal works, and potential overlap between the two, would prove valuable in informing the interpretation of the pieces.

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