

MARY HOWE

Dr David C F Wright

Mary Carlisle was born in Richmond, Virginia, at the home of her maternal grandparents. She was born into a very wealthy and privileged family. Her father, Calderon Carlisle, was a successful lawyer and this meant that Mary had a private education which included piano lessons which was regarded as one of the essential accomplishments of young ladies of the day. One of her early teachers was Hermine Seron. This would explain why most of her early works are for the piano.

She lived in Washington all her life and by the time she was a young teenager she was playing the piano in private concerts and, at the age of 18, entered Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore.

Her father died in 1901 and she travelled abroad. In 1904 she spent four months in Dresden and had some piano lessons from Richard Burmeister who had been a pupil of Liszt. Back home in Washington she continued to mix with the society that had included her respected father and in 1912 she married the lawyer Walter Bruce Howe and this ensured that she would maintain her comfortable life style. Her first child was born and she formed a piano duo with Anne Hull and they performed at various social events and concerts. Mary gave birth to two more children and began to compose. The duo began to perform at symphony concerts and a particular performance of Mozart's magnificent Concerto for two pianos and orchestra K365 is recalled with pleasure.

But it was composition that most interested her. To this end, she studied under Gustav Strube at Peabody and with Ernest Hutcheson and Harold Randolph. She spent 1933 in Paris with Nadia Boulanger.

Part of the best learning process is to study the masters and to copy out their works by hand. J S Bach did it with works of Telemann, Pergolesi and others. With her piano duo in mind, Howe arranged many of Bach's works for this combination. Ten years earlier, in 1923, she had composed an Andante and scherzo for piano quintet and for their New York debut a transcription of the work for two pianos was given.

She formed a friendship with Amy Beach who composed music which sounds like watered-down Brahms and they were both members of the Society of American Composers. In 1925 Anne and Mary gave the premiere of Beach's Suite for two pianos.

Howe had memories of an Afro-American convict chain gang laying dynamite in North Carolina and the sounds of drilling and the explosion while she was out riding her horse. Why this should have so impressed her I cannot say but she composed her first large scale work Chain Gang Song for chorus and orchestra first given at the Worcester Festival by the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. One of her relatives had collected chain gang songs and the work was a success. One female journalist praised it by saying, "There is not a hint of femininity in the piece!"

The following year, 1926, the conductor George Barrere asked her for some orchestral pieces suggesting that she might begin with orchestrating some of her piano pieces. She took her piece Star and orchestrated it effectively. It was a short work with a mighty climax dying away to the Ravelian style of harp effects. Sand was to follow and as the title suggests it was a gritty work. Most of her orchestral pieces were written at the MacDowell colony in the summers from 1926 onwards.

She was the most well-known woman in the musical life of Washington. She helped organise the first of the Elisabeth Coolidge Chamber Festivals. Her affluent means and campaigning led to the formation of the Washington National Symphony Orchestra in 1930 being its first director until 1938. They responded by giving performances of her work including, in 1935, Castellana for two pianos and orchestra and Spring Festival of 1937.

William Strickland (1914-1991) was the conductor and promoted American music all over the world. It was

when he was stationed at Fort Meyer's Army Music School in 1942 that he commissioned *Prophecy 1792* from Howe. In 1946 he formed the Nashville Symphony Orchestra and in 1951 became the director of the Oratorio Society of New York

Castellana is based on four Spanish songs she would have known from childhood. Her father was of Scottish and Spanish descent.

In her middle years Howe had taken up singing. In 1939 a recital of her songs was given in Washington and she had formed a madrigal group. They made up a quartet known as the Howes being Mary and her three children.

She was always interested in classical poetry and, in 1941, wrote three *Pieces after Emily Dickinson* for string quartet. Each of the three movements is based on the last line of a Dickinson poem. It has been described as her most contemporary-sounding work.

In 1942 she composed *Interlude between two pieces* for her son, Calderon, originally written for recorder and harpsichord. At the premiere, Calderon was accompanied by Ralph Kirkpatrick.

During the war she campaigned vigorously to support the American forces and composed two works with the conflict in mind. *Prophecy 1792* speaks of another struggle and is scored for chorus and orchestra to words by the eccentric William Blake and *To the Unknown Soldier* for tenor and piano, or orchestra, with a text by Nicholas Levy.

In 1952 Washington National Orchestra gave a concert of her works. Her husband died in 1954 and the following year she went to Vienna where the Vienna Symphony Orchestra, under William Strickland, played *Star and Sand* and gave the premiere of *Rock* commissioned by Strickland.

She died in 1964, aged 82.

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