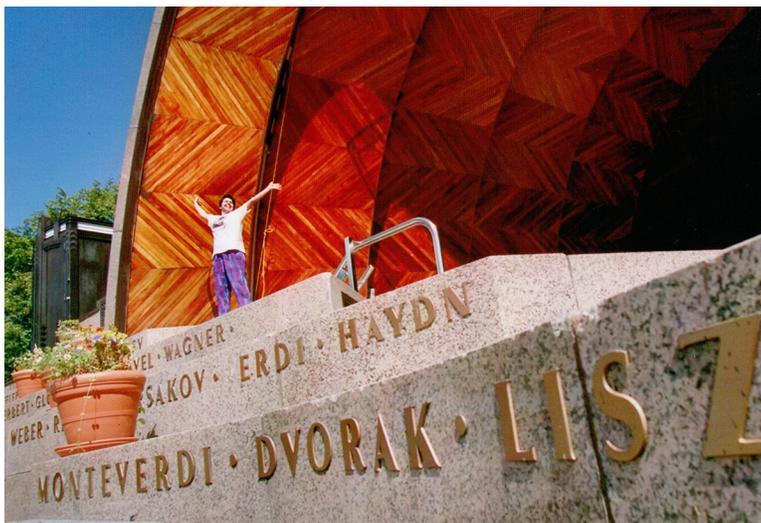


Beach on the Shell:

How I changed an Icon

by Liane Curtis

I remember clearly the day I decided something had to be done about the Hatch Shell. I had the impression the name of Amy Beach was not included among the many composers that decorate the Shell. It was a warm fall afternoon in 1997 and I set out to take a serious look to confirm that impression and answer some questions. How many names were there? Who were they and how had they been chosen? Why had the Shell been built and how was it maintained? Finding all that out was easy – that was research. But how to get the name of Amy Beach – certainly one of Boston's most important composers – added to the Shell? That was activism, something new for me. That was to be a long and daunting process.



This idea of taking action came through the encouragement of my new affiliation with the Women's Studies Scholars Program at Brandeis University (that would become part of the WSRC). The Scholars Program reinforced the notion of collaboration with others and applied feminism. Thus, in finding out how to bring about change, I realized I should work together with a group of people who cared about preserving and recognizing Boston's History.

Virginia Eskin, a remarkable pianist (and one of the first to record Beach's music), pointed me to the work of the Boston Women's Heritage Trail (BWHT). I attended the celebration of their new Guidebook, and they were excited to be involved in the new and significant project I proposed.

In 1997, 87 names, written in five-inch bronze letters, decorated the Shell. Ranging from the obvious (Bach, Mozart, Beethoven) to the obscure (Hadley, Gilbert, Auber) all the names were indeed male. The Shell was built in 1941 (by means of an endowment memorializing Edward Hatch) for use by the Boston Pops in their summer season, and the composers' names seem to have been a decision of the Pop's conductor and tireless champion, Arthur Fiedler. Newspaper reports describe a balloting process by which a list of 97 names was distributed among 70 experts with the goal of choosing 50 for inclusion. But ultimately, 86 names – most of those on the original list – wound up on the Shell. The balloting process gave a veneer of democracy and meritocracy to the process, and served to build excitement and public interest in the new structure. But the list of names reflected Fiedler's own idiosyncratic values in music programming. He was certainly not known for taking women seriously – his colleague Harry Ellis Dickson described him as “an unabashed male chauvinist,” so it seems predictable he would not recognize Beach, despite her fame and achievement. Sadly, because of Fiedler's attitude, the Pops was one of the last orchestras to admit women.

Uncovering this history led me to an important insight: the names inscribed on this monument largely reflected the opinion of one man.

I also noticed that a living composer, John Williams, was honored by having his name added to those on the Shell upon his retirement as conductor of the Pops in 1993. This was a precedent I could use. Although “carved in stone” the names could be changed; one had already been added!

My next task was to persuade the state agency in charge of the Shell, the Metropolitan District Commission (MDC, now the Department of Conservation and Recreation) to make a change. They were amazingly helpful and offered many suggestions as well as documentation on the history of the Shell. I began writing to prominent musicians and scholars to petition the MDC in favor of adding Beach's name. But getting the

support of Pops conductor Keith Lockhart was clearly crucial. I worked on him with a series of letters and calls. In March, 1999 he led a concert for children featuring women composers only, revealing that he understood this gender issue and took it seriously. Once Lockhart threw his name behind the project, everything fell into place. The BWHT wrote to the MDC in April, 1999, formally urging them to include Beach's name. The MDC announced its decision in June 1999 (only 1 ½ years after my autumn walk), and Beach's name was unveiled at the Pops concert on July 8, 2000. At that event Maestro Lockhart praised Beach, said the addition of her name was "long overdue," and performed her lovely "Bal Masque."

This process also can be seen as part of a groundswell of interest in Amy Beach that has produced new books and articles about her life and more performances and recordings of her music. But "groundswell" suggests this was the result of some unseen force of nature. In reality, change takes place



Liane Curtis (center) at the unveiling of Beach's name on the Hatch Shell

through the perseverance and dedication of individuals, working alone and together. Adrienne Block worked on her book about Beach for 10 years; it took numerous partners to get Beach's name up on the Shell; Virginia Eskin insisted on recording and performing works by the composer who, when we were in music school, was only referred to by the dismissive nickname "Mrs. Ha Ha Beach." These dedicated women inspired me, the Women's Studies Research Center supported me, and the determined and enthusiastic Boston Women's Heritage Trail gave me incredible backing so together we could change an icon.

Has the addition of Beach's name made a difference? The interest in the event was great – my role in getting Beach included was the subject of articles in the *Boston Globe* and the *Somerville Journal*; radio broadcasts and publications featured and discussed the event, including the books *Boston Sites and Insights* and *Unsung: A History of Women in American Music*. Recordings and performances of her music continue, including the 2004 release of the first American recording of the Piano Concerto, and performances in the fall of 2007 of her opera *Cabildo*. While I can't directly connect these performances to having Beach's name on the Shell, I do believe her inclusion and recognition help the climate for those interested in performing and studying women composers, and also for composers themselves.

And my life has changed as well. I am an active board member for the Boston Women's Heritage Trail and the president of two organizations based at the WSRC, The Rebecca Clarke Society, Inc. and Women's Philharmonic Advocacy.