

## **Amy Beach (1867-1944)** **String Quartet in One Movement (1921-29)**

The Second New England School, which included the most prominent American composers of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, is widely regarded as the music that inspired the next generation of musicians and composers to find their own path. These include Edward MacDowell, Arthur Foote, Charles Ives and George W. Chadwick. All but one of them studied in Europe, especially Germany, and their music tended to reflect the German romantic ideas in music which were prevalent in Europe. But each of them, in their own way, developed a unique personality which is obvious in their greatest works.

The only woman to be recognized as a member of this group of composers is Amy Beach. In fact, she became the first internationally recognized woman composer with her works performed by the leading orchestras and musicians of her time. Her output was enormous with full-scale orchestral works, chamber music, and songs. She was also a brilliant pianist and wrote numerous pieces for that instrument. Today she remains one of the most respected composers of the early 20th century.

Her music follows many of the conventions of her contemporary composers, but in some cases, it pushed the limits of harmonic principles. Her later works, especially, were more forward-looking in their sound and their form, but none more so than her single-movement String Quartet. Written between 1921 and 1929, the quartet makes more demands on the listener than any Beach composition that came before it. A masterpiece with a lifetime of experience and a superior refinement of her art behind it, the piece can be very sparse in its sound, angular, contrapuntal, dissonant, even harsh, especially to those used to hearing her work. It is forward-looking and revelatory and had an impact on the next generation of composers.

In its three sections, the quartet is based on three Inuit tunes, using motives, or small portions of the tunes, as the basis for development and counterpoint throughout the work. In the first section, the viola introduces the tune *Summer Song*, soon joined by the other instruments leading to the second violin's statement of *Playing at Ball*. The second section presents the tune *Itatujang's Song* giving the quartet an emotionally charged center. The opening section returns, and the piece ends in quiet contemplation.