

MARY ELIZABETH DOWNEY

20TH CENTURY WOMAN COMPOSER IN A “MAN’S WORLD”

MARY ELIZABETH DOWNEY was born in St. Paul, Minnesota in 1895 and died there in 1994. Between those years she left a legacy as composer, organist, recitalist, accompanist and teacher. She attended the Visitation Convent School and St. Agnes Conservatory of Music. From her teenage years she played the organ in Church as well as accompanying silent movies.

In the early 1920s she went to New York to study composition with Pietro A. Yon who was at that time organist at the famous St. Patrick’s Cathedral. While in New York she trained the boys of the St. Patrick’s Cathedral Choir. She was proficient in the Ward Method of teaching and performing Gregorian Chant and was music teacher at several prominent New York Parochial Schools. One of her students was the actor, Efrem Zimbalist, Jr., son of the violinist, Efrem Zimbalist, and opera singer, Alma Gluck. She held positions as organist in a number of New York City Churches during her time there.

Mary Downey’s first published composition was “Mass in Honor of the Blessed Sacrament.” When Pietro Yon brought her to J. Fischer & Bro. publishing house in New York, the Fischers were very impressed with her talent but were concerned that a “woman composer’s” work would not sell. Her music first appeared under the name: M. E. Downey!

The publisher later acknowledged her true identity in a catalogue of works—something judging from Downey’s pride in excelling in a field then dominated by men, would have happened eventually.

“I can do musically what a man can do,” she would reply to those who inquired about her career. “Why from the time I was 17 years old and accompanied a choir of 150 men, I have supported myself by making music.”

Her “Irish Rhapsody” was standard repertoire for the U.S. Army band for decades and her song “My Minnesota” was sung in public schools and played by municipal bands throughout Minnesota.

In 1948 she received the prestigious Outstanding Achievement of American Pen Women Award for her “Requiem Mass” for three male voices and organ. The award was presented by first lady, Bess Truman at the White House.

Miss Downey wrote Masses, Hymns, Art Songs, organ works and instrumental pieces. The “MISSA NATIVITATIS BEATÆ MARÆ VIRGINIS” was composed in 1928 and premiered at Christmas Midnight Mass in St. Patrick’s Cathedral that year under the direction of Pietro Alessandro Yon conducting the 150 voice St. Patrick’s men and boys Choir with a professional orchestra and soloists from the Metropolitan Opera. It was broadcast live on the radio. Maestro Yon richly orchestrated the work for strings, four horns, oboe and organ especially for the occasion.

Yon once said of Downey: “...Downey’s playing is indeed a source of happiness to any audience. Her technique can only be rated among the best concert organists. Her interpretation, rhythm, phrasing are clear evidence that she is an artist.”

After returning to her native St. Paul, MN in 1948, she was in demand as a recitalist, teacher, and accompanist. She was chairwoman of the Woman’s Institute, active in the Schubert Club, and a judge for the Metropolitan Opera Auditions. This remarkable woman was active as a musician well into her 90s!