

## Frederick Zech and the First American Clarinet Sonata

Patrick Hanudel

Throughout the twentieth century, despite incredible manic energy and a wild social side, the American photographer Ansel Adams produced work of amazing structure, power, and beauty. In the summer of 1979, Adams sat down with *Time* magazine art critic Robert Hughes to talk about his life—growing up in San Francisco, breaking his nose in the 1906 earthquake, dropping out of grade school, taking piano lessons, and harboring an ambition to become a concert pianist. Although Adams later gave up on a professional keyboard career—he decided that his hands were too small—he credited his private teacher Frederick Zech for instilling him with the work ethic that carried over into his photography. Adams recalled of Zech, “He was a great disciplinarian. He turned me from a Sloppy Joe into a good technician. If it hadn’t been for that, I don’t know what would have taken its place.”<sup>1</sup>

Zech’s place in music history, however, has been little more than a curious footnote. Even a native California musician reading Robert Hughes’ article in 1979 would probably be unaware that, during the turn of the last century in San Francisco, Zech was a well-known pianist, conductor, and composer. Of course, Zech is not a completely forgotten figure—the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* gives him a brief mention<sup>2</sup>—but for all intents and purposes, he has disappeared. Some of this may be due to the fact that, in the nineteenth century, American art music borrowed heavily from European idioms, and by the 1930s such works were considered quaint. In addition, during Zech’s lifetime, the West Coast had not yet become a center of serious musical activity, and a heavy bias remained in favor of East Coast composers. Perhaps most importantly, with the exception of a European tour in the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Hughes, “Master of the Yosemite,” *Time* 114 (3 September 1979): 42.

<sup>2</sup> *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., s.v. “Frederick Zech Jr.,” by John A. Emerson and Robert Commanday, 2001.

early 1900s, Zech's music seems never to have been regularly performed outside of California.<sup>3</sup> During his career, two of his symphonic poems were played in Los Angeles, but after this nothing is known. On the other hand, Zech's obscurity may be self-made; according to his friend Olive Hyde, a San Francisco violinist, Zech had a shy and introspective disposition and as a result "preferred the beauty of California to the clamor of an eastern city."<sup>4</sup>

In this vein, one may wonder if Zech might prefer the anonymity of dusty boxes to being the target of a historical treasure hunt. The unearthing of a forgotten composer can be a difficult subject—if a composer has been superseded by his contemporaries, the underlying assumption is that his music has little to contribute. In the case of Frederick Zech, though, some of his music is more meaningful than one might think. A glance at his catalogue reveals two sonatas for clarinet and piano: the first one titled "Sonata No. 1 in B-flat Major" dating from May 1897 and the second one titled "Sonata in A Major" with no date.<sup>5</sup> The first sonata is noteworthy, for in many clarinet circles, the Columbia University professor Daniel Gregory Mason is regarded as the first native-born American composer to write a clarinet sonata. In 1915, at the request of a young American clarinetist named Burnet C. Tuthill, Mason completed his *Sonata in C minor, Opus 14*. As a descendant of the Second New England School, Mason's artistic outlook was conservative, and while his Opus 14 boasts some fresh and intriguing harmonies, its intense lyricism is largely an extension of the previous century. But if the date on the manuscript of Zech's *Sonata No. 1 in B-flat Major* is to be believed, this work precedes Mason's sonata by at least eighteen years and follows by a mere three years the two Sonatas, Opus 120 of Johannes Brahms, arguably the pinnacle of Romantic chamber music for the clarinet.

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<sup>3</sup> *Frederick Zech Collection, 1858-1926*, Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library, U.C. Berkeley, 1984.

<sup>4</sup> Olive Hyde, "An American Composer of the West," *The San Francisco Musical Club Bulletin* (February 1929): 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Frederick Zech Collection, 1858-1926*, Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library, U.C. Berkeley, 1984.

Although interest in Zech's music largely died with him, the existence of his clarinet sonatas was not completely unknown. In the Autumn 1966 issue of the *Journal of Research in Music Education*, Burnet C. Tuthill, now an esteemed scholar, lists every clarinet sonata written to that point, arranged alphabetically by composer and often accompanied by a brief opinion of the work. On the last line, Tuthill mentions Zech and his "Two Sonatas," but he says nothing about them.<sup>6</sup> Indeed, the clarinet sonatas may have yet to be performed; there are no programs or reviews concerning them, and they remain in manuscript in the composer's hand.<sup>7</sup> The first sonata may have been played through at one point—nineteenth-century composers rarely wrote wind sonatas, and when they did, they usually had a specific performer in mind. Moreover, in the first sonata, Zech makes frequent corrections in the piano part, especially in terms of register, and he takes the time to write an entirely separate part for the B-flat clarinet. Curiously, this part has no pencil scratches, breath marks, reminder accidentals, or any other alterations; if the sonata was played at all, it was scarcely enough to rehearse. The second sonata, by contrast, has most likely remained untouched; it remains in a C score with no separate solo part.<sup>8</sup>

The significance of Zech's first clarinet sonata reaches beyond being a mere "historical first." The question is what it has to add to an already crowded repertoire and what it has in common with the clarinet sonatas of its era. At first, one might presume that Zech's approach mirrors that of Brahms, as Zech was a first-generation German-American and Mason's family dates back to eighteenth-century New England. A study of their music, however, reveals that while Zech's sonata shares some aspects with Brahms and Mason, it emerges as a remarkably

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<sup>6</sup> Burnet C. Tuthill, "The Sonatas for Clarinet and Piano," *Journal of Research in Music Education* 14 (Autumn 1966): 212.

<sup>7</sup> *Frederick Zech Collection, 1858-1926*, Jean Gray Hargrove Music Library, U.C. Berkeley, 1984.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

distinctive work. While the idiom and methodology of the sonata echo the values of nineteenth-century Romanticism, Zech looks both backward and forward in his search for a unique voice, and while his arrival may not be groundbreaking or unusual to some ears, it stands as possibly the first attempt by an American composer to address the clarinet as a solo instrument.

Through a Power Point presentation involving photographs, archival newspaper material, the composer's manuscript, modernized score excerpts, and selected audio examples, this lecture aims to begin a dialogue about the role of the clarinet in early American classical music. It begins with an overview of Zech's life and the cultural atmosphere of nineteenth-century San Francisco; delves into the substance of Zech's first clarinet sonata; and makes comparisons and contrasts with the significant clarinet sonatas of its time and place. A discussion of Zech's compositional style will include his handling of the clarinet's range and variety of color; his thoughtful balance of technical and lyrical passages for the soloist; his highly involved keyboard part that reflects his background as a virtuoso pianist; the remarkable "melting pot" of influences in the melodies, harmonies, and textures, ranging from passages of stormy Beethoven to those hinting at Debussy and "blues" music; and the challenges of realizing the music, namely editorial decisions and performing advice.

To be sure, every new work, written one year or a hundred years ago, carries a certain amount of risk; not every piece will enter the standard repertoire, and over time audiences and scholars will carefully measure the reasons for inclusion. Regardless of their initial reception, though, the Zech sonatas open the door to the largely unexplored topic of the early American clarinet sonata and offer the prospect of a greater canon of works in the solo clarinet literature. Such a canon allows room for previously unknown composers and secures more music for research, education, and performance. Moreover, every composition deserves a chance to be

heard and evaluated not only for what it does, but for what it says.

Ansel Adams might agree. In 1965, he ceased to photograph commercially, but he spent the remainder of his life taking pictures for his personal album, making prints out of previous negatives, and revising his books on photography. Adams felt there was always something to be learned in the new and the old, believing that in his craft the most important aspect was not the source of the picture, but its ability to draw an emotional response. Near the end of his conversation with Robert Hughes, Adams cast this philosophy into words, remarking that “The negative is the score—the print is the performance.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Hughes, “Master of the Yosemite,” *Time* 114 (3 September 1979): 44.

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