

Between Art and Science: Amy Beach's Hermit Thrush Pieces and Early-Twentieth-Century Birdsong Transcription

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This file includes the abstract, keyword list, bibliography, and related material for the video essay, "Between Art and Science: Amy Beach's Hermit Thrush Pieces and Early-Twentieth-Century Birdsong Transcription" by William O'Hara. This video-essay may be found at <https://vimeo.com/societymusictheory/smtv115ohara>

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Abstract for
Between Art and Science: Amy Beach's Hermit Thrush Pieces and Early-Twentieth-Century
Birdsong Transcription
by William O'Hara, *SMT-V11.5*

Throughout her long career, American composer Amy Beach (1867–1944) engaged with birdsong in numerous ways. This video examines her use of transcribed birdcalls in the piano piece “Hermit Thrush at Eve” (1922). These transcriptions arose at a time when ornithologists were exploring the merits of traditional notation versus numerous graphical systems, leading to debates which not only anticipated the rise of graphic notation in the twentieth century, but contested the very nature of birdsong by means of its connection (or lack thereof) to human musical constructs like harmony and tonality. By analyzing the piece in the context of early-twentieth-century naturalism, I argue that Beach’s “Hermit Thrush at Eve” constitutes a compelling speculative exploration of how avian music intersects with human, and shows how artistic and scientific inquiry can inform one another.

Short Keyword List

Amy Beach, birdsong, ecomusicology, piano music, twentieth-century music, transcription, harmony

Extensive Keyword List

Amy Beach, ecomusicology, American music, New England, piano music, twentieth-century music, transcription, harmony. Hermit thrush, sound film, MacDowell Colony, New Hampshire, birdsong, early film sound, graphic notation, tonality, musical narrative, Henry Oldys, Artetas A. Saunders, Albert Brand

About the Author

William O'Hara is Associate Professor of Music Theory and Director of the Gettysburg Seminars Program at Gettysburg College. He earned his Ph.D. at Harvard University and previously taught at Tufts University. His research interests include chromatic harmony, film and video game music, and the history of music theory. He serves as an Associate Editor of *Music Theory Online*, and his

writings have appeared in venues such as *Music Theory Spectrum*, *Music Analysis*, *Music Theory Online*, *Music and the Moving Image*, and *The Journal of Sound and Music in Games*, and in the Oxford Handbooks on *Public Music Theory* and *Sound and Music in Video Games*.

Multimedia Credits

“1937 BELL AND HOWELL FILM “ HOW MOTION PICTURES MOVE AND TALK ”

16mm & 35mm FILM PROJECTORS XD14224” PeriscopeFilm. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmojArs6Tl4>.

“Eastern Meadowlark.” American Bird Conservancy. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RcZC7kmh5ZU>.

“Field Sparrow Song.” American Bird Conservancy. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NDLDmDAUOkc>.

“Hermit Thrush Singing.” Wild Bird and Nature Videos by McElroy Productions. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o0mATRdzZSc>.

“Red-Winged Blackbird.” American Bird Conservancy. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hrgGTvzuAII>.

“Song Sparrow Song.” American Bird Conservancy. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YnejB-fYuJk>.

“Whip-poor-will Song.” American Bird Conservancy. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jIxfVSS_65o.

Recording

Beach, Amy. “Hermit Thrush at Eve.” *Cabildo: An Opera Premiere and Six Short Pieces*.

Christopher O’Riley, pianist. Recorded in 1995. Delos 3170, 1995.

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