

# “Musical Meaning in Amy Beach’s Gaelic Symphony”

Larissa Mulder

## Introduction

Amy Beach’s Symphony in E Minor, often called the Gaelic Symphony, is rich with hidden meaning and motives. Her composition came shortly after Antonín Dvořák’s “New World” Symphony and was originally composed in response to some statements Dvořák had made about American concert music. Dvořák claimed that the foundations and main compositions of American-sounding concert music should draw heavy influence from the African American spirituals and work songs from those traditions.<sup>1</sup> Beach, who grew up in Boston surrounded by Gaelic communities, felt Dvořák’s statements too limiting and focused on just one cultural group’s influence. Thus the “Gaelic” Symphony was created as a response that showcased her skills and traditional Gaelic tunes. To do this, Beach incorporated four individual Gaelic tunes as well as one of her own previous works to connect people emotionally to the struggles, hardships, triumphs, and remembrances Irish emigrants experienced in their journeys.

## Movement I

The first movement of Beach’s symphony opens by mimicking one of her earlier works titled “Dark is the Night,” composed in 1890 (Gaelic Symphony was published in 1896). The beginning of “Dark is the Night” features what musicologist Adrienne Block calls “chromatic whizzing evok[ing] the turbulent sea surrounding the Emerald Isle. [Beach] uses it throughout the movement as an accompaniment to the first theme and introduction to subsequent sections.... A driving and unifying element.”<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1) Beach’s music represents the hardships encountered

---

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Gerk, “A Critical Reception History of Amy Beach’s Gaelic Symphony,” Master’s thesis, California State University, 2006: 15.

<sup>2</sup> Adrienne Block, *Amy Beach: Passionate Victorian*. Oxford University Press (1998): 96.

by Irish emigrants and the difficulties of displacement, and she builds this idea from the beginning.<sup>3</sup> The turbulent sea mimics the journey that many emigrants had to face. The original piece “Dark is the Night” features lyrics from British poet William Ernest Henley describing the narrator’s anxieties about traveling within the storm; he crafts a narrative of someone facing a fearful and dangerous situation.<sup>4</sup> The significance of the use of this original work is notable as a way for Beach to call upon the texts of “Dark is the Night ” and invoke that imagery within an instrumental setting. Audience members listening to Gaelic Symphony who are familiar with Beach’s work would recognize the tune from “Dark is the Night” and be reminded of the lyrics of that song. They would then be able to understand how the sounds of the symphony are reflecting and connected to the meaning in the words of “Dark is the Night”. (Fig. 2)

[Insert Figures 1 and 2 and Audio Examples 1 and 2]

Audio Example 1: “Dark is the Night” (0:00-0:10)

["Dark is the Night"](#)

Audio Example 2: Gaelic Symphony Movement 1 (0:00-0:20)

[Gaelic Symphony Movement 1](#)

---

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Gerk, ““Common Joys, Sorrows, Adventures, and Struggles’: Transnational Encounters in Amy Beach’s “Gaelic” Symphony.” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 2 (2016): 170.

<sup>4</sup> Gerk “Common Joys Common Sorrows,” 171.

**Allegro con fuoco.**

legatissimo. *mf* The  
*pp*  
*pp*  
*cres* *cen* *do*.  
 sea is full of wand'ring  
*cres* *cen* *do*

Fig. 1: "Dark is the Night" mm.1-6<sup>5</sup>

**Allegro con fuoco. (♩. = 120.)**

Violini I.  
 Violini II.  
 Violenze.  
 Violoncelli.  
 Contrabassi.

Fig. 2: Gaelic Symphony Mvt. 1 mm.1-6<sup>6</sup>

Another way that Beach adds a layer of meaning and emotion to her symphony is by using what musicologists refer to as a topic or style. Music scholar Leonard Ratner writes about how music in the 18<sup>th</sup> century developed characteristic figures or themes which composers could use to indicate and evoke various feelings and affections. One notable topic Ratner explains is

<sup>5</sup> Amy Beach, "Dark is the Night," Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1889-1890.

[https://imslp.org/wiki/3\\_Songs%2C\\_Op.11\\_\(Beach%2C\\_Amy\\_Marcy\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/3_Songs%2C_Op.11_(Beach%2C_Amy_Marcy))

<sup>6</sup> Amy Beach, *Symphony in E Minor, Op 32*, Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1897.

[https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony\\_in\\_E\\_minor,\\_Op.32\\_%27Gaelic%27\\_\(Beach,\\_Amy\\_Marcy\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_in_E_minor,_Op.32_%27Gaelic%27_(Beach,_Amy_Marcy))

called “Storm and Stress” (*Sturm und Drang*); he describes it as an expression of intense feelings using relentless rhythms, chromatic/dissonant harmonies and a full, declarative sound.<sup>7</sup> This connection to the topic of Storm and Stress not only allows Beach to create the emotion and picture of a storm, but connects to the wider variety of music and literature that uses this topic, allowing listeners to be immersed and reminded of a larger body of work. This allows for a deeper meaning to be created, recognizing not just the storm of the Irish immigrants but positioning her work within a tradition of musical unrest through Storm and Stress. Beach’s use of many of these characteristics within Movement I’s opening, as well as her allusions to her previous work containing textual references to storms, helps to create meaning and invoke a mood of suspense, turmoil, and fear within the unrelenting waves of the sea.

After establishing this turbulent storm as the backdrop for the symphony, Beach introduces the next musical theme used in Movement I. This is also pulled from her work “Dark is the Night” where it coincides with the text “a wild wind shakes a wilder sea,” continuing to build this theme of emigration across the sea as a terror-filled journey.<sup>8</sup> (Figs. 3 and 4).

[Insert Figures 3 and 4 and Audio Examples 3 and 4]

---

<sup>7</sup> Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*, Schirmer Books (1980): 21.

<sup>8</sup> Block, *Amy Beach: Passionate Victorian*, 96.

Fig. 3: “Dark is the Night” mm. 43-46<sup>9</sup>

Fig. 4: Gaelic Symphony Mvt. 1 mm. 17-27<sup>10</sup>

Audio Example 3 “Dark is the Night” 0:53-1:00

["Dark is the Night"](#)

Audio Example 4 Gaelic Symphony Mvt 1 0:18-0:28

[Gaelic Symphony Movement 1](#)

<sup>9</sup> Amy Beach, "Dark is the Night," Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1889-1890.

[https://imslp.org/wiki/3\\_Songs%2C\\_Op.11\\_\(Beach%2C\\_Amy\\_Marcy\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/3_Songs%2C_Op.11_(Beach%2C_Amy_Marcy))

<sup>10</sup> Amy Beach, *Symphony in E Minor*, Op 32, Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1897.

[https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony\\_in\\_E\\_minor,\\_Op.32\\_%27Gaelic%27\\_\(Beach,\\_Amy\\_Marcy\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_in_E_minor,_Op.32_%27Gaelic%27_(Beach,_Amy_Marcy))

While "Dark is the Night " is the most frequently used material in the first movement, Beach also introduces a melody from an old Irish tune. Throughout the symphony, Beach borrowed a total of four tunes found in an Irish periodical called *The Citizen* from the volume printed in 1841. *The Citizen* was published in Dublin, Ireland (Beach had access through the Boston Public Library) and the tunes she chose were written just before the Great Famine, when Ireland's farmlands were abundant and the countryside and towns flourishing. For her first movement Beach used one tune "Conchobhar ua Raghallaigh Cluann" (Connor O'Reilly of Clounish), which the periodical claimed "was composed by Turlogh O'Carolan, a famous Irish harper of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries."<sup>11</sup> (Fig. 5) Scholar Sarah Gerk notes that "amidst a movement that celebrated distant, historical concepts of Irishness, Beach tapped a source from just before the worst disaster in Ireland's history. The famine also precipitated significant changes in Irish life, leaving a sense among the Irish that numerous indigenous practices were lost in its wake."<sup>12</sup> Beach's use of this tune serves as a d connection to Irish history, alluding to the tragedy that forced many Irish people to emigrate and face the tumultuous journey she has been representing thus far in the movement. The tune is introduced briefly around the middle of the movement and then is presented in its entirety at the end of the piece. The English horn carries most of this tune's melody and is meant to mimic the sound of a bagpipe's drone, while the overall instrumentation at this moment is a connection to the countryside and idealized past of Irish history. (Fig. 6)

[Insert Figures 5 and 6 and Audio Examples 5]

---

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Gerk, "Common Joys Common Sorrows", 170.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 167.



Fig. 5: “Conchobhar ua Raghallaigh Cluann” m. 1-4<sup>13</sup>



Fig. 6: Gaelic Symphony Mvt 1 mm. 147-153<sup>14</sup>

Audio Example 5: Gaelic Symphony 2:34-3:00

## [Gaelic Symphony Movement 1](#)

### Movement II

In contrast to the first movement’s two themes (“Dark is the Night” and “Conchobhar”), the second movement has just one main musical theme, composed around the Gaelic tune “Goirtin Ornadh” (sometimes spelled Goirtin Eornan, which means “The Little Field of Barley”).<sup>15</sup> This tune is another traditional Irish song that tells the story of someone dreaming of their love and wishing they could be near to them again, although some scholars have identified

<sup>13</sup> Turlough O'Carolan, "Conchobhar ua Raghallaigh Cluann" Dublin: The Citizen, (June 1841), tune no. 21, 368. <https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/citizen1>

<sup>14</sup> Amy Beach, *Symphony in E Minor, Op 32*, Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1897. [https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony\\_in\\_E\\_minor,\\_Op.32\\_%27Gaelic%27\\_\(Beach,\\_Amy\\_Marcy\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_in_E_minor,_Op.32_%27Gaelic%27_(Beach,_Amy_Marcy))

<sup>15</sup> Kathryn Kuby, “Analysis of Amy Cheney Beach’s *Gaelic Symphony, Op. 32*” DMA diss., University of Connecticut (2011): 43.



GOIRTIN ORNADH. 10. "The little field of Barley."

Maelz<sup>1</sup> Metron. ♩ = 132.

Rather Slow and with Expression.

I dream'd, my love, of thee, In the first sweet sleep of night, When  
 winds were breathing low, And the stars were shining bright, I

*dolce.*

*crescendo.*

Figure 8: "Goirtin Ornadh" mm. 1-8<sup>17</sup>

Solo

Ob.

*cresc.* *mf*

Figure 9: Gaelic Symphony mvt. 2, mm. 5-9<sup>18</sup>

Audio Example 7: Goirtun Eornan 0:00 - 0:20

"Goirtin Eornan"

<sup>17</sup>Unknown, "Conchobhar ua Raghallaigh Cluann" Dublin: The Citizen, (April 1841), tune no. 10, 260.

<https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/citizen1>

<sup>18</sup>Amy Beach, *Symphony in E Minor, Op 32*, Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1897.

[https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony\\_in\\_E\\_minor,\\_Op.32\\_%27Gaelic%27\\_\(Beach,\\_Amy\\_Marcy\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_in_E_minor,_Op.32_%27Gaelic%27_(Beach,_Amy_Marcy))

Audio Example 8: Gaelic Symphony Mvt. 2, 0:24-0:36

### [Gaelic Symphony Movement 2](#)

The solos of the woodwinds (meant to represent bagpipes) are the main way that Beach introduces the Gaelic tune into this movement. As previously stated, the *Alla Siciliana* markings evoke feelings and imagery of pastures, the setting where bagpipes in Ireland are traditionally played. These two techniques together set the scene of Irish homeland and the idealized landscape that the tune, referencing longing and love, gracefully floats across. The middle section of this movement increases in tempo and becomes slightly more chromatic and frantic, transforming the “Goirtin Ornadh” tune as death or emigration transform the relationships of the Irish people, before returning and settling back into the slower, more peaceful setting of the *Alla Siciliana*.

[Insert Audio Example 9]

Audio Example 9: Gaelic Symphony Mvt 2, 3:33 - 4:33

### [Gaelic Symphony Movement 2](#)

## **Movement III**

For her third movement, Beach pulls material first from the Gaelic tunes “Paisdin Fuinne” (The Lively Child) and then “Cia an Bealach a Deachaidh Si” (Which Way Did She Go). The former is a song mourning a dead child while the latter praises Ireland’s beauty and became a solace for Irish emigrants amidst their sorrows.<sup>19</sup> Thematically these two tunes seem like an odd pairing, but Beach’s goal for the third movement was to express sympathy for the suffering of emigrants and to represent the multitude of situations with which sorrow has been

---

<sup>19</sup>Block, 90-91.

felt. By giving space to each of these tunes individually and then blending them together, Beach unifies the contexts of suffering into a long, lyrical lament.

In order to demonstrate this lament, Beach calls upon a common musical theme which Gerk terms the “sentimental longing” motif. Gerk explains how this is a common practice to use in American music associated with Irish identity. This theme starts the musical line quite high in the range of the instrument or voice and gradually descends. The high starting point is meant to sound strained and intense, especially in contrast to the lower pitches that precede and follow it. Within my own studies on Irish lament in traditional folk songs, the practice of lofting the voice up high during the middle of a phrase and delving into low tones at the end is a common vocal representation of lament. The descending lines are meant to mimic the low tones produced when weeping, interspersed with high pitched cries. “Paisdin Fuinne” and “Cia an Bealach a Deachaidh Si” feature this musical practice in their endings (Figs. 10 and 11) and Beach weaves it throughout her movement, allowing the conclusion of the Gaelic tunes to end with this descension. (Fig 12). Despite being the longest movement of her symphony, the musical meaning making material in this movement is fairly simple, allowing for the overall mood of the movement to be focused on the two Irish tunes and the ways in which their material is developed and interspersed. She chose the two tunes to convey a pervasive sense of loss, to present a flourishing image of the Irish alongside an intense lament and express the kind of sympathy for the suffering that she felt Dvořák was insensitive in doing with slave music in his symphony.<sup>20</sup>

[Insert Figs. 10, 11, 12 and Audio Example 10]

---

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

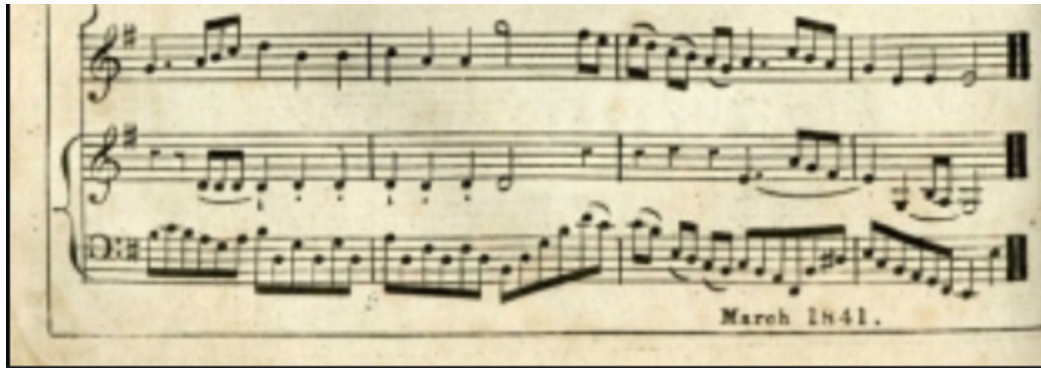


Fig 10: "Paisdin Fuinne," mm. 14-17<sup>21</sup>

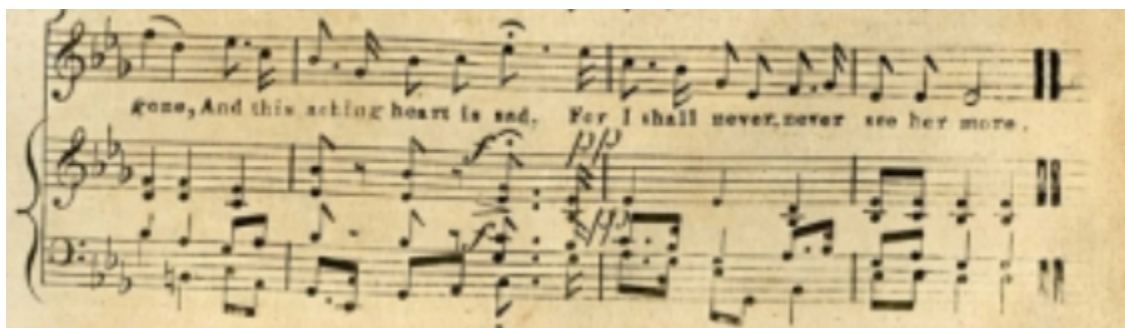


Fig 11: "Cia an Bealach a Deachaidh Si," mm. 15-18<sup>22</sup>



Fig. 12: Gaelic Symphony Mvt. 3, mm. 141-146<sup>23</sup>

Audio Example 10: Gaelic Symphony Mvt 3, 10:00-10:40

### [Gaelic Symphony Movement 3](#)

### Movement IV + Conclusion

<sup>21</sup> James Aird, "Paisdin Fuinne" *Dublin: The Citizen*, (March 1841), tune no. 9, 203.

<https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/citizen1>

<sup>22</sup> Unknown, "Cia an Bealach a Deachaidh Si" *Dublin: The Citizen*, (January 1841), tune no. 1, 64.

<https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/citizen1>

<sup>23</sup> Amy Beach, *Symphony in E Minor, Op 32*, Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1897.

[https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony\\_in\\_E\\_minor,\\_Op.32\\_%27Gaelic%27\\_\(Beach,\\_Amy\\_Marcy\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_in_E_minor,_Op.32_%27Gaelic%27_(Beach,_Amy_Marcy))

Beach stated that she had no subsidiary theme or phrase within the final movement that isn't influenced by previous movements.<sup>24</sup> She reintroduces previous musical themes with full orchestration and fanfares of trumpets to bring the symphony to a climatic and energetic close. She does not feature any traditional Irish tunes from previous movements but does pull musical material from the first movement's setting of "Dark is the Night" and recapitulates those ideas into this final context. The majority of this movement is devoted to exploring in a fuller, newer context the musical ideas of storms, emigration, and sadness as a way of painting a picture of hope and rebirth in the new land that Irish immigrants experienced. By taking the themes of hardship and lament that had been crafted in previous movements and reintroducing them into a celebratory finale, Beach is making a statement on the resilience of Irish identity and their adaptability within these new contexts.

[Insert Audio Example 11]

Audio Example 11: Gaelic Symphony Mvt. 4, 10:19-11:08

#### [Gaelic Symphony Movement 4](#)

Amy Beach was very intentional about the message she set out to convey with the blending of American and Irish traditions in her Gaelic Symphony. By incorporating traditional Irish tunes, often in their fullness, into the symphonic form she drew her audience into a deeper understanding of the stormy turmoil of emigration, the sadness at leaving a pastoral and beautiful homeland, and the celebration of establishing a new life that these migrant Irish communities had experienced. The symphony exhibits musical stylistic traits that are particular to Beach as a composer while demonstrating technique that is masterful in its work. The Gaelic Symphony

---

<sup>24</sup> Block, 99.

stands not only as a testament to Beach's capabilities as a composer, but as a representation of the struggles and sufferings of the Irish people, "their laments, their romance, and their dreams."<sup>25</sup>

#### References

Aird, James. "Paisdin Fuinne" *Dublin: The Citizen* 3, March 1841.

<https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/citizen1>

Apthorp, William. "Review of Beach's Gaelic Symphony (From the Boston Transcript)." *Music: A Monthly Magazine* 13, no. 6 (1898): 793.

Beach, Amy. "Dark is the Night". Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1889-1890.

[https://imslp.org/wiki/3\\_Songs%2C\\_Op.11\\_\(Beach%2C\\_Amy\\_Marcy\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/3_Songs%2C_Op.11_(Beach%2C_Amy_Marcy))

Beach, Amy. *Symphony in E Minor, Op 32*. Boston: Arthur P. Schmidt, 1897.

[https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony\\_in\\_E\\_minor,\\_Op.32\\_%27Gaelic%27\\_\(Beach,\\_Amy\\_Marcy\)](https://imslp.org/wiki/Symphony_in_E_minor,_Op.32_%27Gaelic%27_(Beach,_Amy_Marcy))

Block, Adrienne Fried. "Dvořák, Beach, and American Music" in *A Celebration of American Music*. Ed. Richard Crawford, R. Allen Lott, and Carol Oja. University of Michigan Press, 1990: 256-280.

---- *Amy Beach Passionate Victorian: The Life and Work of an American Composer 1867-1944*.

Oxford University Press, New York (1998): 86-104.

Gates, Eugene. "Mrs. H.H.A. Beach: American Symphonist." *The Kapralova Society Journal* 8, no. 2 (2010): 1-10.

---

<sup>25</sup> Kuby, "Analysis of Amy Cheney Beach's Gaelic Symphony", 29.

Gerk, Sarah. "A Critical Reception History of Amy Beach's *Gaelic Symphony*." Master's thesis. California State University, 2006.

---- "Common Joys, Sorrows, Adventures, and Struggles': Transnational Encounters in Amy Beach's "Gaelic" Symphony." *Journal of the Society for American Music* 10, no. 2 (2016): 149-180.

Kuby, Kathryn Amelia. "Analysis of Amy Cheney Beach's *Gaelic Symphony, Op. 32*." PhD dissertation. University of Connecticut, 2011.

Mardinaly, Susan. "Amy Beach: Muse, Conscience, Society." *Journal of Singing* 70, no. 5 (2014): 527-540.

Matthews, W.S.B. "Things Here and There: A New Symphony by Mrs. H. H. A. Beach." *Music: A Monthly Magazine* 11, no. 2 (1896): 199-210.

O'Carolan, Turlough. "Conchobhar ua Raghallaigh Cluann" *Dublin: The Citizen* 3, June 1841.  
<https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/citizen1>

Ratner, Leonard. *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style*. New York: Schirmer Books, 1980.

Scruton, Roger. *The Aesthetics of Music*, Oxford: Clarendon Press. (1997) ISBN 0198166389.

Unknown, "Cia an Bealach a Deachaidh Si" *Dublin: The Citizen* 3, January 1841.  
<https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/citizen1>

Unknown, "Goirtin Ordan" *Dublin: The Citizen* 3, April 1841.  
<https://www.itma.ie/digital-library/text/citizen1>

Weaver, Daniel. "Celticism and American Musical Nationalism, 1889-1904" PhD dissertation Washington University: 98, fig. 2.1.

