

The Choral Music of Margaret Ruthven Lang (1867–1972)



A black and white image of Margaret Ruthven Lang's signature. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing script. It starts with a large, decorative 'M' and ends with a long, horizontal flourish. The signature is set against a light gray background.

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The year 2012 marked the fortieth anniversary of the death of one of America's most noteworthy yet neglected composers: Margaret Ruthven Lang (1867–1972). Lang has the distinction of being the first American woman to have a work performed by a major American orchestra (1893, Boston Symphony), and she became a significant composer of some 30 choral works and 140 songs, solo piano pieces, and chamber and orchestral works. Her publishers were some of the most respected of the time—Arthur P. Schmidt, Oliver Ditson, and Theodore Presser in America; and Breitkopf & Härtel in Germany. Lang's vocal music in particular was hailed by reviewers of the time and championed by such artists as Edward MacDowell, Ernestine Schumann-Heinck, and Dan Beddoe. Her choral music was performed by numerous organizations, church choirs, schools, and choral groups, including the Women's Lyric Club of Los Angeles, the MacDowell Club Chorus, and the St. Cecilia Club in New York.





The Choral Music of Margaret Ruthven Lang

Margaret Lang was born in Boston, Massachusetts, the eldest child of the prominent musician Benjamin Johnson “B.J.” Lang and Frances Morse Burrage Lang, an amateur singer. An active teacher, conductor, pianist, composer, and organist, B. J. Lang was influential in the musical life of Boston (starting the Cecilia Society and the Apollo Club—choral organizations still in existence today) and the musical studies, compositions, and career of Margaret. The Lang family frequently hosted prominent musicians of the time, including Antonín Dvořák, Ethel Smyth, and Ignacy Jan Paderewski. B. J. Lang was a friend of Franz Liszt and his daughter, Cosima, with whom Margaret’s mother corresponded. Hans von Bülow was also in his circle of friends, as was Richard Wagner (their children were playmates). B.J. conducted the premiere of Tchaikovsky’s *Piano Concerto No. 1* with von Bülow playing.

Margaret demonstrated an early talent for music and studied piano and composition with her father. Her other teachers included illustrious members of the Second New England School such as George Whitefield Chadwick, John Knowles Paine, and J. C. D. Parker; Edward MacDowell was a mentor. Her education also included spending two winters in Munich with her mother, where she studied violin, first with Franz Drechsler and then Ludwig Abel, who was concertmaster of Hermann Levi’s Court Theatre of Munich. (Levi had conducted the world premiere of Wagner’s *Parsifal* at Bayreuth, and B. J. Lang brought *Parsifal* to Boston for its American premiere.) For counterpoint and fugue, Margaret studied with Victor Gluth, a professor at the Bavarian Royal Conservatory, whose three-act opera on the legend of *Zlatorog* [Golden Horns] premiered at the Royal Opera in Munich. Her teacher, George Chadwick, had studied at the Royal Conserva-

tory in Munich beginning in the fall of 1879, where he had also worked with Ludwig Abel. Being a woman, Margaret Lang was not allowed to enroll in the Conservatory but was taught privately. Her education encompasses a veritable “Who’s Who” of musicians of the late nineteenth century.

Margaret’s first significant performance was also a milestone for women composers. She was the first American woman to have a work performed by a major American orchestra with her *Dramatic Overture* Op. 12 performed by the Boston Symphony under the direction of Arthur Nikisch on April 7, 1893. In a letter to Margaret two days later on April 9, Amy Beach, another American composer, said:

I wish to send you my heartiest congratulations upon the success, last evening of your interesting overture, as a woman I cannot help feeling gratified that all your hard work should be so fully recognized and appreciated, and your composition given a place on our symphony program. Its superb performance must have gladdened your heart, while it gave pleasure to the audience. With all good wishes for your future success, believe me.¹

Choral music was an important medium for Margaret, and in fact, her first works, Opuses 2, 3, and 5, were choral pieces, first performed by her father’s two groups, the Cecilia Society (known today as the Boston Cecilia) and the Apollo Club men’s choir: “Love Plumes His Wings to Fly Away” for SSAA and “In a Meadow” for mixed chorus are unfortunately missing, but “The Jumblies” with words by Edward Lear for male chorus, baritone solo, and two pianos was published by Schmidt in 1890 and has remained in print. “The Jumblies” premiered on December 3 and December 8, 1890, with E. Cutter Jr. and

Ethelbert Nevin (the composer of *The Rosary* and *Mighty like a Rose*) pianists, and Otto Roth as the baritone soloist. “The Jumblies” opened the second half of the concert. The review in the *Musical Herald* said:

It is impossible to deny Lang’s facility in composition or the grace with which she states her ideas, and while she has constructed a rather formidable work upon Lear’s innocent text, she has shown an original bent in her harmonies, and a sympathetic study of the voices.²

B.J. Lang’s two choirs provided Margaret with first performances of her choral works under the best possible conditions—having her own father prepare and conduct the works.

With her initial success, Lang went on to compose 140 songs over the next twenty-five years. Several of the most popular, such as “Irish Love Song” and the *Nonsense Rhymes* of Edward Lear, she would also arrange for chorus and in some cases make multiple choral versions. Lang had a gift for melody, and there is a craft and skill in her methods that strikes one repeatedly. In 1912, Ethel Syford in the *New England Magazine* described Lang thus:

It is the more sensitively poetic truth and beauty which (sic) she strives for and attains, and it is this unflinching quality which makes her songs of a higher order than those produced by any other American composer.³

Lang’s understanding of the singing voice and her ability to write successful vocal parts remains evident in her choral works. The voicing falls easily within the expected range for each part, and the musical ideas lilt logically through each piece. Lang explored numerous avenues chorally, easily navigating between the sacred and the secular voice. Much of



her sacred choral writing remains challenging yet accessible to the amateur church choir. Lang's rich, oftentimes pictorial, treatment of text remains a hallmark of her successful choral writing. Fletcher Dubois, Lang's great-nephew, recalls her telling him, "the music is a slave to the text."⁴

In 1900, Margaret Lang wrote about her compositional goals:

My intentions have been poetic and

never purely i.e. merely musical, often dramatic and sometimes story-telling. I disapprove of pianoforte or vocal music which has no definite meaning to convey...The musical setting of a song should be subservient to its text, according with the poetical color of the text.⁵

This certainly rings true in Lang's numerous choral works. From the jovial lyrics bouncing through her secular limericks, to the traditional *Te Deum* text set rev-

erently in its entirety, her innate gift with text stands unchallenged.

Unfortunately Margaret Lang, like her father, destroyed her unpublished music; copies of her music have been collected from libraries, private collections, the Lang family, and the Arthur P. Schmidt archives at the Library of Congress. Of the twenty-seven choral works still in existence today, five are sacred and twenty-two are secular. Donald George has collected them and in

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some cases transcribed manuscripts to form the complete available scores for Lang's choral works that are available

for download from the Delos website <www.delosmusic.com> as printable PDFs, along with the March 2014 release of a compilation CD titled *All the Heart of Me!* by the Crane School of Music Choirs.⁶ (A complete listing of Lang's available choral works by ensemble type is listed on page 43)

Of Lang's existing choral works, several are particularly outstanding and became quite popular in her time, and show most inventive and uniquely expressive choral writing. For example, her sacred, ten-minute, multi-movement *Night of the Star*, *A Cycle for Christmas*, Op.52, for SATB choir with soprano solo, tenor solo, and soprano/alto duet accompanied by organ, lies within the reach of any respectable choir, with the possible addition of soprano and tenor soloists.

In the first movement, "The Star of Bethlehem," the news of Christ's birth ripples through heaven as the soprano exclaims the hushed news to the gathered choir of angels. This choir of angels then spreads the word by echoing the soloists' sentiments.

The second movement, "The Vision of Mary," affords a glimpse into Christ's future on the cross, even as he draws his first breaths on earth. Two soloists, the women of the SATB choir, or most desirable, an outstanding children's choir, may perform this particular duet. The tenor soloist tenderly describes Joseph's conflict regarding his son in the third movement, "Joseph's Vigil," and the final rousing SATB chorus "When Christ was Born in Bethlehem," takes the choir through numerous abrupt key modulations as the celebration surrounding Christ's birth resounds in the heavens.

"The Jumbles" has been available in print through the Library of Congress and is a dramatic arrangement of the Edward Lear nonsense words for male chorus, baritone solo, and two pianos. This arrangement almost begs a

comparison to music from Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman* with its stormy passages and dramatic baritone solo, in addition to the *Ride of the Valkyrie* quotes to illustrate the intrepid trip of the people in the sieve.

A bit more challenging is her secular composition for double, four-part women's choir, "Wind." Certainly this piece would test even the most accomplished singers with its tricky rhythmic motifs and unexpected intervals. The vocal lines in *Wind* mimic the unpredictable nature of storms; great flurries of turbulent excitement, bursting in and out from all different directions followed by warm, rolling, consistent breezes tell the story. The work was commissioned by Victor Harris for the St. Cecilia Club in New York, who asked Lang for a women's choral piece of a "rousing" nature. *The Musical Courier* review of January 28, 1914, said:

Miss Lang did an excellent piece of work in this composition. She has captured the spirit of the wind in a remarkable way and has done this without using any of the tricks which composers from time immemorial, almost, have used to represent the sighing and sobbing of the wind ... and the consequence is that she has composed a beautiful piece of music.⁷

Only the manuscript of the piece exists in the Library of Congress, but "Wind" has been transcribed by Donald George and is included in the CD recordings and printable scores.

For texts, Lang often chose women writers. "Bonnie Ran the Burnie Down" for SATB choir is a beautiful Scottish-influenced song with text by Carolina Oliphant (Lady Nairne, 1766–1845). Carolina Oliphant's verses are second only in popularity to Robert Burns, although her name is not as famous. For women such as Lady Nairne,

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it was not appropriate for their social standing (indeed also for women of Margaret Lang's standing) to publish poetry or compose music, so Lady Nairne kept her avocation secret, even from her own husband, publishing her works under the name Mrs. Bogan of Bogan. Margaret Lang wrote that she liked to sign her name M. R. Lang, reminiscent of her father's use of initials (B.J.).

Lang's *Te Deum* is an excellent example of economy in composition and a masterful setting of this religious text. The work stays within the bounds of the average church choir and organist and achieves a superb effect for the listener. The musical themes Lang presents are repeated, modulated, and altered so that the composition has a certain unity, which is a sign of a dedicated composer. The work also flows from the beginning to the end in an exuberant, joyful mood and stands out as an eminently singable setting of this extended text.

Ethel Syford said:

There is ample reason to say that no modern writer has given us a *Te Deum* which so thoroughly holds to the churchly situation as does the *Te Deum* by Miss Lang. It never once relaxes from the mood of the church, never a moment of lassitude, of a lapsing from being the voice of the church into the customary inserts of saccharine beauty. It is one of the greatest church *Te Deums* in existence.⁸

"The Heavenly Noel" is one of Lang's last works, which makes one again regret that her other compositions have disappeared, as the marriage of melody and text in the alto solo, along with Lang's orchestration, is superb. The SSAA choir is voiceless, perhaps symbolizing the angels' adulation as they prepare excitedly

Choral Works of Margaret Ruthven Lang

Mixed Choir

- The Hawthorne Tree*, Op. 25 – SATB, soprano and tenor solo – unaccompanied
- Grant, We Beseech Thee, Merciful Lord*, Op. 51 – SATB – organ
- The Night of the Star: A Christmas Cycle*, Op. 52 – SATB, tenor solo – organ
- In Praesepio*, Op. 56 – SATB – organ (also SSAA)
- Te Deum* – SATB – organ
- Bonnie Ran the Burnie Down*, Op. 25 – SATB – unaccompanied
- Nonsense Rhymes and Pictures*, Opp. 42 and 43 of Edward Lear:
- Old Person of Cassell*, Op. 42 – SATB – piano
- Old Man with a Beard*, Op. 43 – SATB – piano

Women's Voices

- The Heavenly Noel*, Op. 57 – SSAA, mezzo-soprano solo – strings, piano, organ, and harp or only piano
- In Praesepio*, Op. 56 – SSAA – organ
- Song of the Three Sisters* – SSAA – piano
- The Wild Brier* – SSAA – piano
- The Lonely Rose* (a cantata) – SSAA, soprano solo – piano
- Wind*, Op. 53 – SSAASSAA – unaccompanied

Song Arrangements

- Irish Mother's Lullaby*, Op. 34 – SSA – piano and a violin or cello obbligato
- Irish Love Song*, Op. 22 – SSA – with string quartet, string bass, clarinet in A, and flute
- Nonsense Rhymes and Pictures*, Opp. 42 and 43 of Edward Lear
- The Old Lady of France* – SSAA – piano
- The Person of Filey* – SSAA – piano
- The Old Man of Dumbree* – SSAA – piano
- The Person of Skye* – SSAA – piano
- The Old Man in a Tree* – SSAA – piano

Men's Voices

- The Jumblies*, Op. 5 – TTBB, baritone solo – 2 pianos
- Boatman's Hymn*, Op. 13 – TTBB – piano
- Here's a Health to Ane I lo'e Dear* – TTBB – piano
- Alastair MacAlastair* – TTBB – piano
- Nonsense Rhymes and Pictures*, Opp. 42 and 43 of Edward Lear
- The Old Man With a Gong* – TTBB – piano, drum, and gong
- There Was an Old Man Who Said, "Well!"* – TTBB – piano
- The Old Man in a Tree* – TTBB – piano
- The Young Lady of Parma* – TTBB – piano



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for Christmas Eve. The choir ultimately bursts into words with the Latin texts of Sanctus and Hosanna. Fortunately, Lang had arranged this piece for small orchestra. Shaun Cagney, a student at the Crane School of Music, SUNY Potsdam under Donald George's mentorship, transcribed the manuscripts for performance. The orchestration is violin I, II, and III, cello, string bass, piano, harp, organ, and tubular bells and is romantically lush and warm. "The Heavenly Noel" is a miniature masterpiece for voices and

small ensemble.

"Grant We Beseech Thee" was written for liturgical use, as Lang was a religious person (the family was Unitarian, but she became an ardent Episcopalian). Heather Eyerly, who conducted the premiere recording, suggested that the powerful repeated *ostinato* of the quarter and two eighth notes in the organ pedal could be thought of as the voice of God. Over this commanding bass, the choir sings a beautiful melody, repeating the words as if pleading, "Grant, We

beseech Thee," with full chords progressing through the piece until the final astonishing "Amen" with their sudden change of tonality and final ending. "In Praesipio" (In a Manger) is a beautiful Christmas hymn-like composition that could become a standard for the holiday season. It has a beautiful melody, and the words describing the stable and manger are touching and lacking in sentimentality. It must have been popular, as she arranged it for SATB and SSAA.

Two other works that stand out among Lang's choral pieces are "Here's a Health to the Ane I Lo'e Dear" and "Boatman's Hymn," both for TTBB and piano. "Here's a Health" is a charming song, a delightful melody and setting of the text by Robert Burns. B. J. Lang included this piece in the last concert that he conducted with the Apollo Club on May 1, 1909. Reviews of "Boatman's Hymn" include: "The beginning was rich and original in its harmonies, flung to and fro in the vocal parts ... thoroughly in keeping with the subject," but the effect of the refrain, 'tide top, on the tide top, ho!' was inspiring and inspired, and the young composer has again shown good promise in her work" and "Miss Lang's piece is one of the best of her efforts in male composition, for it is fresh and melodious, admirable in its construction and well placed and effective in the voices. The club sang it splendidly."⁹

Although Lang destroyed all her orchestral music, the instrumental accompaniment arrangement for two of the choral pieces still exists in manuscript. Lang arranged "Irish Love Song" (her most popular piece, selling over 120,000 copies) for string quartet, string bass, clarinet in A, and flute; and "The Heavenly Noel" for strings, piano, organ, and harp. Both compositions have been transcribed by Shaun Cagney for modern use. In addition, Lang's publisher asked her to write an instrumental ob-

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bligato for her popular song “An Irish Mother’s Lullaby.”

When she was asked in 1967 why she stopped composing, Lang’s answer was: “Why did I stop, I had nothing to say.”¹⁰ In her own biographical notes in 1960, she states, not without a bit of pride,

My music writing stopped soon after “The Heavenly Noel’s” many performances in many places, with orchestra; with piano; and once at

request, with organ, piano, and harp; —for much-involved housekeeping took place during my mother’s last housebound years.¹¹

Theodore Presser published her final composition, *Three Pianoforte Pieces for Young Players*, op. 60, in 1919.

When Margaret Lang stopped composing, she ardently turned to religion, publishing booklets and sending them at her own expense (some six thousand of these), which she called “Messages

from God.” She described her religious writing as being done “anonymously, but with deep devotion” and “my life’s best work.”¹² Did this creative activity serve as a substitute for composition?

Margaret Lang lived out her life on Brimmer Street in Boston’s Back Bay, an active concert attendee. She has the distinction of being the longest subscriber to the Boston Symphony Orchestra. In 1967, the Orchestra performed a concert in honor of her one hundredth

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birthday and installed a plaque on her seat, first balcony right, B1. Not one for ostentation, at the reception honoring her after the concert, Margaret could not be found because she had left early to catch the last train home, as she had always done.

Rupert Hughes said in *Contemporary American Composers* in 1900,

Personally, I see in Miss Lang's compositions such a depth of

psychology that I place the general quality of her work above that of any other woman composer. It is devoid of meretriciousness and of any suspicion of seeking after virility; it is so sincere, so true to the underlying thought, that it seems to me to have an unusual chance of interesting attention and stirring emotions increasingly with the years.¹³

NOTES

- ¹ Margaret Lang's Scrapbook. Lang Family Papers. Rare Books Department. Boston Public Library.
- ² *Musical Herald*, January 1891, p. 10 as quoted in Christine Amner, *Unsung: A History of Women in American Music*, Westport: Greenwood Press, 1980, 87.
- ³ Ethel Syford. "Margaret Ruthven Lang," *New England Magazine*, xlvii/March 1912, 23.
- ⁴ Donald George and Lucy Mauro, "An Interview with Fletcher DuBois,

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Composers (Boston: L.C. Page and Co., 1900), 438.



- Great Nephew of Margaret 'Blossy' Lang," <<http://www.sequenza21.com/naxos/?p=912>> (accessed June 6, 2012).
- ⁵ James Johnston. "List of Works," <MargaretRuthvenLang.com>, <http://www.margaretruthvenlang.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20&Itemid=125> (accessed June 6, 2012).
- ⁶ The choral CD of Lang's music is part of recording the works of Margaret Ruthven Lang for the Delos label. Two CDs of Lang's songs have been recorded by Donald George and Lucy Mauro: *Love is Everywhere: Selected Songs of Margaret Ruthven Lang, Volume 1* (DE 3407) and *New Love Must Rise: Selected Songs of Margaret Ruthven Lang, Volume 2* (DE 3410) with Volume 1 containing a companion CD-R of printable scores and other information for Lang's songs in both volumes.
- ⁷ *Musical Courier*, January 28, 1914, as quoted in "List of Works," <http://www.margaretruthvenlang.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20&Itemid=125> (accessed 6 June 2012).
- ⁸ Syford.
- ⁹ January 18, 1893, review in the *Transcript* and by Warren Davenport, respectively, found on <http://www.margaretruthvenlang.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=20:list-of-works-annotated&catid=2:uncategorized&Itemid=125> (accessed June 9, 2012).
- ¹⁰ John J. Mullins, "Composer Margaret Lang, 101, just wants to live forever," *The Boston Globe*, February 19, 1967 as quoted in Jim Johnston, "1925-1972," *Margaret Ruthven Lang & Family*, <<http://www.dogboyproductions.com/margaretruthvenlang.com/>> (accessed March 23, 2011).
- ¹¹ Margaret Ruthven Lang, Scrapbooks, Boston Public Library (Boston, Mass.), quoted in Jim Johnston, "1925-1972," *Margaret Ruthven Lang & Family*, <<http://www.dogboyproductions.com/margaretruthvenlang.com/>> (accessed

- March 23, 2011).
- ¹² Margaret Ruthven Lang, Scrapbooks, Boston Public Library (Boston, Mass.), quoted in Jim Johnston, "1925-1972," *Margaret Ruthven Lang & Family*, <<http://www.dogboyproductions.com/margaretruthvenlang.com/>> (accessed March 23, 2011).
- ¹³ Rupert Hughes, *Contemporary American*

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