

## Publisher's Profile

# Clara Lyle Boone, Pioneer in Music Publishing

by Gayle Worland

All the dogged determination that would drive Clara Lyle Boone through the next four decades rose up in her that night in 1957 when she dined at New York City's Le Ruban Bleu in the company of Hans Heinsheimer, one of the sharpest minds in the music publishing business. What if someone—like herself—founded a company to publish the neglected works of America's contemporary female composers, the wide-eyed young music teacher proposed. "Look, Clara," replied her mentor, who would soon be heading to Europe to scout out new operas for the Metropolitan, "nobody will buy music written by a woman."

The 20th-century grandniece of Daniel Boone then sat back in her chair and understood perfectly that it was her destiny to be a pioneer. In the next 17 years, Boone would teach school, compose music, work on John F. Kennedy's presidential campaign, run for Congress in Kentucky on a civil rights platform, help an African American neighbor manage his trucking company, and watch her pennies.

By 1974 she had saved enough to launch Arsis Press, the first company dedicated to publishing the chamber and sacred

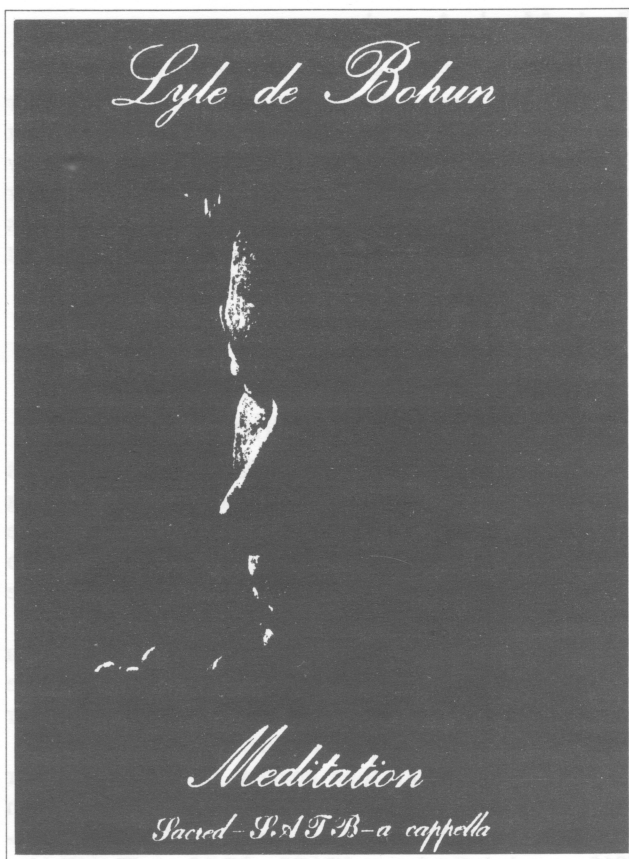
choral music of living female composers. [Her own work, *Meditation*, was the first piece to be published by the Press in 1974; her picture appears on the cover. After publishing several works by Boone, Arsis began to publish works by other women, beginning with Elizabeth Vercoe and Ruth Lomon in 1978.] Today, close to 40 composers (including one man) are listed in the eight-page Arsis Press catalogue. Not only a source of sheet music, Arsis—the Italian word for "upbeat"—is a testament to Boone's unwavering and resolute passion: to make women's music heard.

"In my time, it was believed that women did not write music, and if they did, it wouldn't be music that anyone would listen to," the white-haired Boone, 69, explains in a delicate bluegrass drawl. Wearing sensible shoes and a neatly pressed A-line skirt, she sits ramrod straight on the piano bench in her Washington, D. C., Capitol Hill living room. "I was a rebel," she says. "I know that now."

Boone's girlish voice and measured, genteel speech belie a fiery spunk. When she taught school near the D.C. housing projects, for example, she became a master at breaking up fights and counseling shattered lives. She has been known to chew out concert programmers who refuse to feature music by women, and even tried to convince the Justice Department that the male stranglehold on classical music performances was a violation of antitrust laws. "She's a steel magnolia," says Frances McKay, a Washington composer who has known Boone for 15 years. "Clara is such a treasure," continues McKay. "She's given so much to allow women an opportunity that she didn't have."

Born "on the trail of the Lonesome Pine" in the Appalachian foothills of Kentucky, young Clara learned about women's exclusion from history when she discovered there were no Boone women—only men—listed in the family Bible. Boone's father was a banker and her mother a semi-professional singer, and all four children grew up with a piano nearby. Clara went east to Radcliffe College and then to Harvard University to major in composition and study with Walter Piston. To ensure that she got a fair hearing as a composer, she published her first works under the male pseudonym of Lyle de Bohun. In her opinion, classical music was, and, to a large extent still is, "the last bastion of male chauvinism."

"Publishers are reluctant to take on women composers because their scores don't rent as well as other works," particularly those by the "dead white men" of the standard Western repertoire, says Judy Patrick, the executive director of the Women's Philharmonic. When the Philharmonic ran a survey last year of the nation's 23 top-budgeted orchestras, it found that of the 1,534 pieces of music they performed, only three were written by women. Yet a great deal has changed in the 23-year lifetime of Arsis Press (Arsis will mark its 25th



*Meditation*, the first piece published by Arsis Press (1974), features a photo of Clara Lyle Boone (Lyle de Bohun) on the cover.

dedicated to Evelyn Zuckerman

# FANTASY

Elizabeth Vercoe

$\text{♩} = 50 \pm$

Piano

*f* *f*

(no Ped.) Ped. (hold)

(octave harmonic)

*p* *f* *p* *pp* *f* *f*

Ped. \*

Bliss. on strings

*cresc.* *ff* *dim.* *mp*

Ped. \*

*expr.*

*mp* *p* *mf*

(Ped. —) Ped.

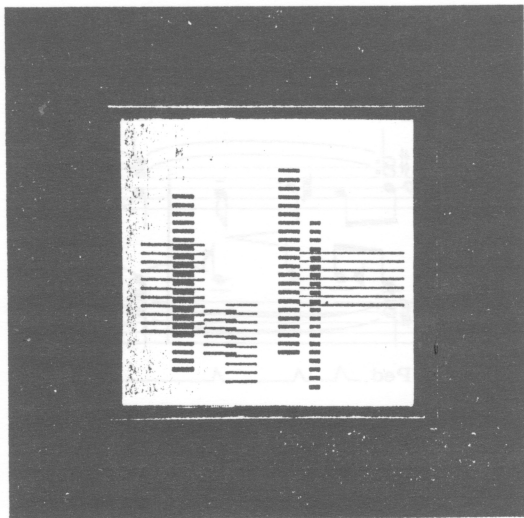
No. 110

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1719 Bay Street, Southeast, Washington, D. C. 20003

*Fantasy* by Elizabeth Vercoe (1978) is one of the first non-Boone works published by Arsis. The music was beautifully engraved by a master craftsman.

## TOCCATA FOR PIANO

BY EMMA LOU DIEMER



SISRA PUBLICATIONS

Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden  
Smithsonian Institution

WASHINGTON, D.C.

*Tocatta* (1980) illustrates the type of the artistic design selected for the covers of Arsis (Sisra) publications.

anniversary in 1999): two women composers have won Pulitzer Prizes, women's studies courses are now commonplace at universities and an increasing number of young women are pursuing careers in composition. Composer McKay, who was the lone woman in her graduate composition seminars of the 1960s, sees a hopeful trend among her young charges at Washington's Levine School of Music: three of her seven composition students are female.

Boone takes a close interest in Arsis composers, attends performances of their works and promotes them in the performance world. Washington-area composer Anna Larson explains what the support of Boone has meant to her. When Boone first heard and offered to publish Larson's *The Listener*, a setting of a Walter de la Mare poem for voice and piano, Larson "was very heavily involved in raising a family.... What Clara did was recognize my ability before anyone else did. She gave me the dignity and recognition of being published. It's hard to exaggerate how much it means to make that connection with the outside world of publishers and agents," says Larson, who now frequently writes music for the theater and recently saw her *Dance for Orchestra* recorded on CD by the Prague Radio Symphony Orchestra. Boone "helped me see myself as a professional, in both a spiritual sense and a practical sense," she says.

Boone's job is not easy, and certainly not lucrative. New catalogues must be printed each season and sent to members of the IAWM and the College Music Society. Between household chores, frequent rides on her Fuji mountain bike (in prim white gloves and a broad-brimmed straw hat in

summer, and a bright yellow slicker in winter), and visits down the street to care for a neighbor with Parkinson's disease, Boone secures copyrights and negotiates contracts, hires printers and deals with her distributors. The royalty checks she writes on her kitchen table pay double the standard industry rate of 10 percent. But as the work-load grows too great for one person, Boone's Olivetti typewriter is ceding administrative work to Associate Editor Elizabeth Vercoe's home computer in Boston.

Boone constantly auditions new compositions, but most are returned to their composers along with a polite and detailed letter giving the reasons for rejection. Boone's selectivity and "wonderful taste" have earned Arsis Press "tremendous respect" in the performance field, says Catherine J. Pickar, associate professor of music at George Washington University and editor of IAWM's Journal, *Women and Music*. "It's a very small press, but highly respected and discriminating; it is very catholic in its public offerings," adds composer and pianist Anthony Stark, the programming director for Washington's Contemporary Music Forum. Clara Boone "is an extremely bright woman," says Stark. "She's an explorer."

Near the end of an interview, Boone picks up a copy of Arsis sheet music from a bookshelf. She takes a meticulous pride in the fine paper and in the prize-winning cover artwork that she scouts out in galleries for every edition. [Arsis Press, or Sisra Publications for ASCAP composers, has won six Paul Revere Awards from the Music Publishers' Association for the quality of its publications.] "It's a way to make every woman's published music stand out," she explains. But such printing is expensive. [See *Fantasy* (1978) by Elizabeth Vercoe; the music was beautifully engraved by a master craftsman who worked for the Press in the early years.] To make ends meet, Arsis Press now requires its composers to deliver camera-ready scores that have been written on a computer. Several Arsis composers have created a modest fund for advertising, and one day hope to add anthologies and recordings to the catalogue.

Arsis has more competition these days—other music presses dedicated to works by women have cropped up in the past decade, and mainstream publishers are now adding more female-written music to their catalogues. "It's the small presses that have led the way," says Stark. Clara Boone, gentlewoman, takes no offense when composers move from her company to a larger publishing house. "If a door opens for them to have more exposure and better marketing, I say, 'Go for it,'" she declares. Women's opportunities are infinitely greater than they were when Boone started Arsis Press, and the music world needs to recognize and applaud her pioneering work.

*Gayle Worland, a former staff member of National Public Radio's "Performance Today" and now its web site manager, is a free-lance writer in Washington, D. C. She frequently writes on music and the arts for The Washington Post. A different version of her article appeared in The Washington Post, March 9, 1997, p. G4. Special thanks to Clara Boone and Elizabeth Vercoe for supplying the illustrations and additional information.*