

Title

Crystal Mandal

Last Edited November 26, 2025

Biography

Rebecca Clarke was born in 1886, just outside of London. In her own memoir, Clarke recalls her childhood as alienating, having been born to and raised by her immigrant parents. Unfortunately, this isolation is a recurring theme in the Rebecca Clarke story, as she was among the first women to perform in a professional orchestra. Throughout her career, Clarke struggled with an embedded systemic misogyny, fraught with incidents doubting the authorship of her music - surely such beautiful music couldn't be written *by a woman?* While primarily regarded by her peers for her instrumental and chamber music - particularly her Viola Sonata and Rhapsody for Cello and Piano, both having been cemented in standard repertoire - Rebecca Clarke Society president Liane Curtis remarks that "it is in the genre of song that the full breadth of her musical style and development is revealed."¹

Typed Notes

Biography

- Dates: 1886 - 1979
 - American Father, German Mother (Child of Immigrants)
 - POST WWII in America, died in New York
- Education
 - Violin at Royal Academy of Music
 - Composition with Charles Villies Stafford
 - * Stafford was teacher of Vaugh Williams, Holst, Bridge
 - * Clarke was his woman student
- Career
 - one of the first women in a professional orchestra
 - "dried up" after 1932
 - music revived in 1976 after a radio interview²

1. Gregory Zavracky, "Shy One: The Songs of Rebecca Clarke.," *Journal of Singing* 80, no. 4 (2024).

2. Zavracky.

Works Overview

- Viola Sonata (1919)
- “Shy One” (1912)
- Rhapsody for Cello and Piano (1923)
- “Seal Man” (1926)

Style Notes

- Extended Harmonies - 9ths, 11ths!!
- Shifting Meters
- Chord Planing - Beginning of “The Cradle”, “The Cherry Blossom Wand”
- Modality \mathbb{Z}_2 Tonal Harmony - Beginning of the Viola Sonata, “Cherry Blossom Wand”
- Almost all of her poets are British

Notes For/Against Trevor Hold

Clarke’s biggest song “Seal Man”, seems a bit too long and complicated to fit within Hold’s ideas of simplicity and lyricism, but much of Clarke’s music is quite idiomatic of the English Romantic Song Idiom as detailed by Trevor Hold. I found minimal melismatic gestures, subtle text painting, and plenty of 9ths (as well as “crunchier” harmonies that Hold was less fanciful of). Clarke’s song has less counterpoint than her instrumental music, but her contrapuntal understanding is nonetheless everpresent in her music, so I’m not sure her music keeps very strictly to the minimal counterpoint required by Hold.

Accessibility

Clarke’s music is not widely available on IMSLP (though some of her more popular songs are). You can find publication information on rebeccaclarke.org, which is quite helpful!

References

- Society, Rebecca Clarke. *Rebecca Clarke*. rebeccaclarke.org. Accessed: 2025-11-26.
- Zavracky, Gregory. "Shy One: The Songs of Rebecca Clarke." *Journal of Singing* 80, no. 4 (2024).