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Music 732

13 April 1992

The "Peterborough Idea"

The creation and development of the first artists' colony in America was the result of the inspiration of the internationally acclaimed composer, Edward MacDowell (1861-1908) and the diligence of his wife, Marian (1857-1956). The MacDowell Colony was founded in the spring of 1907 in Peterborough, New Hampshire and continues today in fulfillment of the MacDowells' idea of a retreat where artists may work in privacy and peace, and share ideas with other men and women of artistic merit in various fields. This unprecedented achievement was often referred to as the "Peterborough Idea" by Marian MacDowell, who because of the tremendous love and devotion for her husband tirelessly worked to realize his dream by attaining the means and overcoming the physical boundaries that would otherwise have made it impossible. Throughout their life together, and even long afterwards, Edward MacDowell provided the creative vision and Marian the practical resource that resulted in the flourishing success of the first American artists' retreat founded "to promote the arts of music, literature and the drama, architecture, painting and sculpture and the other fine arts, to develop a sympathetic understanding of their correlation and the appreciation of their value, and to broaden their influence and thus carry forward the life purpose of Edward A. MacDowell." (Morison 522)

Carrying forth the life purpose of Edward MacDowell became the life purpose of Marian Nevins from the very beginning of her life as Mrs. MacDowell. She first met MacDowell in Frankfurt, Germany where she had intended to further her studies as a young concert pianist. She consulted Joachim Raff, the famous composer and teacher who in turn referred her to one of his pupils who he described as a gifted, brilliant young American. For three years Marian studied with MacDowell until she was called home by the sudden death of her father. The following year MacDowell also returned to America and asked Marian to marry him. Marian believed that he had great talent that was being stifled by his teaching responsibilities, so she agreed to marry him only if he gave up teaching and allowed her to support them both on an inheritance, as described in the following quotation from Wisehart:

> When he asked me to marry him I assured him I was willing to do so, but upon one condition. 'Give up teaching for five years,' I said, 'and for that time we will live on the five thousand dollars remaining from what my mother had left me!' To this day I can see

> the way he threw back his head and laughed. 'Certainly not,' he answered, 'How did you ever get the idea that I couldn't earn a living?' (21)

He eventually did agree to the arrangement and in 1884 they were married and later moved to Wiesbaden, Germany. For nearly five years MacDowell (the name Marian always used when referring to Edward) spent virtually all of his time working on his music, never letting a day go by without composing something. (Wisehart 224) Marian gave up her career in support of her husband's believing that his talents were more creative, while hers were more interpretive.

> 'At last I came to see that my career must be sacrificed for his,' she said, 'I knew I had a gift, but I knew also that mine was interpretive and that his was worth far more to the world because his was creative. And never for a single moment have I regretted the sacrifice. Because of it the world has some of his best work. What could I have done that would have meant anything like so much? Every day I live I am happier because of that sacrifice.' (Clarke 2)

She also kindled his love for nature by dragging him away from his work for long walks in rural areas of Switzerland, a new experience for him as he had grown up in New York City and never been to the country. This period of freedom from responsibilities and appreciation for nature, which was made possible by Marian, certainly must have had a large part in inspiring his future dream of a secluded artists' colony in the country, which was also ultimately made possible by Marian.

MacDowell's works brought him instant fame and recognition in America as well as Europe and upon his return in 1888 he settled in Boston and was highly praised and sought after as a composer, pianist and teacher. He appeared with the leading orchestras and quartets of Boston and New York and received numerous acclaimed performances of his works including his concerto, a symphonic poem, and the *Sonata Tragica.* (Wisehart 224) In 1894 Charles Follen McKim, a noted architect and close associate of MacDowell, established the American Academy in Rome of which MacDowell was a trustee. The Academy consists of schools of classical studies and fine arts which include a wide variety of disciplines and provides studios and residences to selected fellows. This establishment served as the original model for MacDowell's idea of an artists' colony in America. (Carley 7) The following quote from MacDowell's writing about the American Academy illustrates his strong belief in the "fundamental unity of the separate arts" and the need for artists from various disciplines to associate and exchange ideas:

> For years it has been my dream that the Arts of Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, and

> Music should come into such close contact that each and all should gain from this mutual companionship. That students in all these Arts should come together under the same roof and amid such marvelous surroundings seems almost too good to be true. (Carley 7)

In 1896 the appointment committee at Columbia University proclaimed MacDowell as "the greatest musical genius America has produced," and they appointed him as head of the School of Fine Arts, which was then in its formative stages. (Wisehart 224) A few years later a group of well known figures in the creative arts, including Sarah Bernhardt and Charles McKim, formed the New York MacDowell Club, which embodied the composer's ideas about the affiliated arts. (Carley 7) During this time he also led the Mendelssohn Glee Club, which would later prove to be instrumental in the establishment of the MacDowell Colony.

Three years after their return to America Marian again interceded to find a place away from the demands of the city where MacDowell could fully realize his creative capabilities. The following events have been summarized from Marian's descriptions in Morison's History of Peterborough. During a luncheon in Boston Marian met Miss Mary Morison and during their conversation about the MacDowell's plans for the summer Marian indicated that she was looking for a "little cottage in the country where MacDowell would have two quiet months to do his work". Miss Morison suggested that Marian might find what she was looking for in the Morison's family hometown of Peterborough. So one morning in 1891 Marian got on a train and headed to Peterborough to see what she could find. As she got off the train she met a man who asked if he could help in any way and she proceeded to tell him about her conversation with Mary Morison. This man turned out to be Allie Noone, one of Peterborough's leading citizens and he invited her to dinner and promised to take her to a place that he thought might be possible for her to rent in the summer. After dinner he brought her to a dark, unpainted, two story farmhouse a short distance away and convinced the owner (Ellen Kimball) to move in with friends and rent the house to the MacDowells for two months in the summer for $50.00. Marian goes on to describe that when MacDowell first came to Peterborough she "never saw anyone so impressed with the beauty of New Hampshire... ." "...in Peterborough he saw everywhere equal beauty (to that in Europe), but in its perfectly natural state - underbrush, dead limbs, great trees close together, and from the very first this was a side of life he had unconsciously longed for." The MacDowells continued to rent the Kimball house for the next five summers until one day in the spring of 1896 they received a telegram from an old friend saying that an abandoned farm was up for sale for the modest price of $1500.00 MacDowell had not as yet received his appointment to Columbia University and their resources were meager, so he

informed Marian that they couldn't buy it. But the following morning, without consulting him, she took the train to Peterborough and after seeing the "little house on top of a hill, with a beautiful view on every side of an equally beautiful forest" borrowed $500 as a down payment and bought the farm. The reply to her telegram telling MacDowell about the purchase was a "grim one, merely saying, 'All right, but have it in your own name.'" (525-9)

Yet, MacDowell's passion for Peterborough overcame him and he soon forgot his fears about the purchase. Marian described that he found life in Peterborough "as romantic as we Americans sometimes thought we found in Europe" (Morison 528) She later described a conversation they had during one of their frequent lunch excursions around the countryside:

> And I remember so well one day, when we had seen three or four of the old houses that had belonged to early settlers and they had deserted and gone West where better land was to be had, I remember his smiling and saying to me, 'To me they are just as romantic as those tumbledown castles, because they speak of bygone days and of the people who lived here, and of their descendants, and here we find the remnants of their old homes, just as we found the remnants of the old homes in the castles.' (MacDowell 2)

The property consisted of a small, run down house and some outbuildings on about one hundred acres of land. They remodeled the buildings into one large Cape Cod style house which they named Hillcrest. The new house included a music room, but its location proved unsuitable for MacDowell as he was distracted by the sound of Marian's work in the kitchen and garden, and so they built a log cabin in the woods about a half a mile from the house, where he went to work every morning. It was here that he composed the *Norse* and *Celtic Sonatas*, the *New England Idylls, Fireside Tales*, and many others of his famous works (Wisehart 224), as well as a kind of dedication to the cabin to the music of *From a Log Cabin* :

> A house of dreams untold,
> It looks out over the whispering tree tops,
> And faces the setting sun. (Fillmore 476)

The construction of the small, one room cabin was begun by Marian and is another example of her consistent effort to enable her husband's creativity. It was completed in 1899 and became the inspiration for the future studios of the MacDowell Colony. (Carley 23)

MacDowell's first love was composing, but he was forced to supplement what amounted to a meager income from his compositions with teaching. He cared deeply for his students and during his days at Columbia he worked with many struggling young musicians who had what he called a

"hall-bedroom" existence. His summers in Peterborough and his association with the American Academy gave him the idea to provide the means for his students to spend summers in Peterborough, at low cost and under the same conditions that he enjoyed. This idea grew into a dream where he imagined artists from all the fine arts could come, at a fee that anyone could afford, and under conditions that offered individual freedom and total privacy, as well as the opportunity to associate with artists from other disciplines. His ideal did not include teachers as his dream was not of a school for elementary study, but of a colony of gifted artists. (Brown-Landone 1)

Unfortunately MacDowell did not have the means to build the residence and studios needed for such an undertaking and year after year his dream went unfulfilled. In 1904 he became ill and retired from Columbia University. He continued private teaching and composition until he suffered a collapse that left him in a condition that was "beyond the aid of medical science". (Wisehart 225) Although MacDowell's mind became increasingly clouded and he gradually lost touch with reality, the "Peterborough Idea" remained clear and its unfulfillment continually tormented him. The following account by Marian poignantly describes her final resolve to facilitate her husbands desire and ease his pain:

> He became uneasy and fretful in the in the early dawn of a day about a year before the end came, and I went to his bed and asked him what was troubling him. This thing been an obsession with him for several years, this idea of providing a place where creative artists could go and work in quiet and peace. You see, we knew so well what it meant to fight the wolf from the door and do creative work at the same time. I found him fretting about that. I tried to soothe him. 'I have never broken a promise to you,' I said, 'and I promise you if I live I will find a way to make it easier for other artists than it has been for you. I will promise you that I will do this if you will stop worrying about it and forget it.' (Clarke 2)

After that he did forget it and his final year was spent in relative peace, secure in the unfailing trust and belief in his wife which had provided him the means to succeed throughout his life. He died in New York City on January 23, 1908 at 8:00pm. (Gilder 110) and was buried on the Hillcrest property in a grave marked by a large natural boulder.

After her promise Marian organized meetings with the MacDowell Club in New York to try and develop her husband's scheme of an artists' colony. While generally supportive they were skeptical as to the feasibility of such as a project owing to the lack of any other such successful

enterprises in the country. After many more meetings the MacDowell Memorial Association was incorporated as a subsidiary of the New York MacDowell Club for the purpose of developing the "Peterborough Idea", and Marian deeded the entire Hillcrest property, which now consisted of over two hundred acres, to the corporation with the condition that she could continue to live there. The actual deed as reprinted on page 29 of the 3 September 1913 edition of the *Musical Courier* reads as follows:

> It is expressly and especially desired that this home of Edward MacDowell shall be a center of interest to artists working in varied fields, who, being there brought into contact, may learn to fully appreciate the fundamental unity of the separated arts. That in it the individual artist may gain a sympathetic attitude towards the works of artists in fields other than that in which such artist tries to embody the beautiful by recognizing that each art has a special function just so far as it has gained a special medium of expression.
>
> That while the use of the house should thus materially be given, for the most part, to productive artists, nevertheless its use might be accorded to artists and others who are sympathetic with the aims of the donor.
>
> That no social distinction shall be allowed to determine the choice of those who may be permitted to make use of the privileges of the place. That it shall in no sense be looked upon as a charitable institution; and, therefore, those who avail themselves of its privileges should be required to pay such moderate sums as might be possible, in return for the benefits received.

When MacDowell became incurably ill in 1904 the Mendelssohn Glee Club had organized a nation wide campaign which was able raise more than $40,000.00 toward his medical expenses, thanks to his popularity and the sponsorship of such well known figures as Grover Cleveland, Andrew Carnegie, and J.P. Morgan. (Carley 7) After his death about $30,000.00 remained and it was offered to Marian to provide for her living expenses, but she refused it and requested that it be given to the MacDowell Memorial Association. Although there was some opposition by J.P. Morgan, "who thought kindly of making a contribution to Edward MacDowell's widow, (but) refused to give a cent for a 'damn fool colony of artists'" (Kendall 2), the money eventually was given to the association. Actually Marian, true to form, had started the project before any substantial funds were available and opened the Colony in 1907, when MacDowell was still alive. She invited two well known artists to be residents that first summer, Helen Farnsworth Mears and Mary Mears, a sculpture and writer respectively. "Mrs. MacDowell invited them to come and was

grateful for their acceptance, for their presence in Peterborough lent the 'foolish scheme' a little credibility." (Carley 8) This credibility and the subsequent donation from the Mendelssohn Glee Club turned the MacDowell Colony into a nationally accepted and successful operation.

Three important events took place between 1908 and 1920 that ultimately solidified the MacDowell Colony as an unshakeable institution. They consisted of a pageant in 1910, the purchase of a three hundred additional acres in 1917, and the National Federation of Music Clubs biennial there in 1919.

Marian wanted to stage an event that would attract a large number of people to the Colony so they might see the beauty of the surroundings and the beginning of what she hoped to do. The idea of a pageant came about when a professor from Harvard, George Baker, offered to produce the entire production without a fee. Hermann Hagedorn, one of the Association directors, offered to write the lyrics, and Chalmers Clifton, a music student at Harvard, offered to arrange and produce the music. (Morison 532) The production involved the entire village of Peterborough and consisted of two hundred and fifty performers. A special "Woodland Stage" was constructed along with wooden seating for one thousand people, and the first production was filled to capacity. The event was repeated over several days and was such a huge success that Marian's account of a conversation with a famous theatrical authority of the day is worth quoting:

> Winthrop Ames after he had heard the third presentation, came over to me and said, 'You know I've just been at Oberammergau, and this pageant could stand beside it in its beauty and perfection, but...'. Then I interrupted and I said, ' What is your "but"?' He said, 'Well, over there it is the people themselves.' Then I said, ' Well how many of these two hundred artists would you think were professional?' He said, 'I think nine tenths'. I said, 'Just ten. Just ten who acted in those pageants were not our village people. And in the scene that you have just heard the music for "1620", when they rushed up onto the stage, they were so impressed, so filled with the sympathy and feeling for their ancestors, that many of them did what they hadn't been told to do, - kneeling down, lifting their hands up to heaven, and singing with fervor the hymn, the tears fast running down their cheeks.' (MacDowell 3)

The benefit of the pageant to the Colony was more than national renown, as it attracted the enthusiastic support of new donors, beginning with Mrs. Emory of Cincinatti who donated thousands of dollars towards the building of a new studio, the purchase of land, and many other things. (Morison 534) Afterwards many other people became donors and it was this support that

enabled the Colony to grow and accomodate the ever increasing numbers of artists who applied to work there.

Then in 1917 Marian heard that Mrs. Tenney, the wife of a farmer who had just died, wanted to sell three hundred acres of land that bordered the property owned by the Association for $16,000.00. She went to see the property and decided to purchase it, without the knowledge of the Association. She borrowed $500.00 as a deposit and then arranged a meeting with the members of the Association. After she convinced one of the members, who was a real estate agent, to visit the property the Association agreed to go through with the purchase, on the agent's enthusiastic advise. In order to facilitate the sale almost everything on the property had to be mortgaged. This mortgage grew to over $30,000.00, until the General Federation of Women's Clubs offered to pay it off if Marian would agree to perform her husbands' works at benefit performances in women's clubs throughout New England. (Morison 537) So once again Marian single handedly furthered her husband's dream.

In 1919 the National Federation of Music Clubs asked to have their biennial at the Colony. It involved the housing of five hundred people throughout Peterborough, and another production of the pageant. The event lost $5000.00 of which Marian assumed the entire debt. Fortunately the *Pictorial Review* offered a prize of $5000.00 for the most important work that had been started in the last few years and Marian won for her work at the Colony. The resulting friendship and financial help of the Federation lasted many years.

In the beginning the first Colonists were usually former students of MacDowell and always women, as there was but one artists' residence on the property, named the "Lower House". In 1911 another building, the "Mannex" was purchased to serve as a men's dormitory. (Carley 8) As more and more buildings were purchased and built Marian served as the architect and contractor, supervising every detail of the construction or remodeling. She also turned fifty acres of the Colony into an efficient, self-supporting, machine-worked farm and made the Colony as self sufficient as possible. She acquired equipment such as a tractor, potato planter and digger, electric milkers, hot-water heated brooders, a sawmill, a silo, an ice pond, and an ice house. (Wisehart 19) Today the colony consists of over forty buildings, including twenty eight secluded artists' studios, a library, residence halls, and Colony Hall (an administrative, dining, and social center) on over 400 acres of woodlands and meadows. (Carley 2) Since 1907 over three thousand men and women of artistic merit have come to the Colony including Thornton Wilder, James Baldwin, Milton Avery, Virgil Thompson, Aaron Copeland, and Leonard Bernstein. As a general rule

eligibility is restricted to creative, as opposed to interpretive artists who have achieved some notoriety in their field, or who have two recommendations from other established artists in their field. More than fifty Pulitzer Prizes have been awarded to Colonists and many famous works were accomplished at the Colony. "Aaron Copeland composed parts of *Appalachian Spring* at the Colony; Thornton Wilder wrote *Our Town*; Virgil Thomson worked on *Mother of Us All*; Leonard Bernstein completed his Mass." (MacDowell Colony Pamphlet)

> In 1963 the MacDowell Colony was designated a National Historic Landmark by the United States Department of the Interior, and in 1966 it was named to the National Register of Historic Places. This distinction recognizes the Colony's historic importance as the first artists' colony in America, as well as its special cultural significance. (Carley 2)

In fulfillment of her promise to her husband Marian selflessly gave everything she had, all of her material possessions, all of her time and energy, and all of her talent and soul to the MacDowell Colony until she died in 1956 at age 99. On August 16, 1952, the occasion of her 95th birthday, a celebration called "Marian MacDowell Day" was given in her honor at Hillcrest in Peterborough during which a featured speaker, Carl Carmer, made the following remarks as summarized by Olin Downes in the New York Times:

> Mr. Carmer recalled the pride that certain Soviet composers expressed at the 1947 International Music Centre in Prague, in believing that their nation surpassed all others in the fostering of musical talent at the "composers' farm" at Ivanovno. 'They were unaware,' said Mr. Carmer, 'that an American woman without federal or state aid, or the help of any foundation, has, solely through her own courageous and persistent effort (after she had passed the half century mark in years), built, guided, maintained and managed such an enterprise in her native country for more than thirty years before Ivanovno was conceived.

Because of Edward MacDowell's creative insight and strong belief in the artistic merit of American men and women, and Marian MacDowell's incredible strength and selfless commitment to the realization of her husband's dream the MacDowell Colony was conceived, nurtured, and established as a tribute to the life purpose of Edward A. MacDowell, and it has had an immeasurable impact on the lives and purposes of countless American artists and a remarkable effect on the cultural development of this country.

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