Maud MacCarthy: From Ireland to India through music and Theosophy

Maud MacCarthy was born in 1882 in Clonmel, County Tipperary, Ireland. Her father Dr. Charles William MacCarthy made a name for himself as a physician, surgeon, painter, sculptor, and musician. Her mother was MacCarthy’s second wife, the contralto, Marion Cuddihy. Because of Charles’s ill health, the family moved to Australia in 1885, where Maud spent her early childhood. She later wrote about her Irish Roman Catholic parents that they were talented amateur musicians “gifted with inborn psychism.”¹ In Australia, Charles composed several comic operas and patriotic war songs like Our Boys, You Bet!: Recruiting Song (ca. 1915), Oh Mother, Asthore!: A Soldier’s Parting (1916), and The Boys of the Dardanelles (ca. 1915). His best-known piece remains The Lyceum Valse (1895) for piano, “dedicated with much affection to his little daughter Maud MacCarthy,” who is pictured on the sheet music’s cover with her violin. He also lectured and wrote on music. A child prodigy on the violin, Maud practiced “for some six hours a day for fourteen years” and had no time to read or to go to school.² Yet, she had “visions,” “wonderful dreams,” and “natural psychic experiences,” and overall was “thrilled” by religion: “not a religion, not any study of books” but a longing “for alignment with Cosmic Consciousness.”³ During her youth, she also became familiar with the Bhagavad Gita and Theosophy, about which over the years she became “more convinced than ever of its underlying truth.”⁴

In 1891, Maud began her studies at the Royal College of Music in London. Later, she successfully performed as a soloist in Britain and
toured the United States, as first ever female soloist with the Boston and Chicago Symphony Orchestras, for example. Actually, in 1906, she did two concerts with Percy Grainger: one at the London’s Queen Hall and one at Leeds Town Hall, where they performed Johannes Brahms’s *A Major Violin Sonata* (Opus 100).\(^5\) A year later, at the age of 22, however, she startled the musical world and made it into the newspaper headlines when she decided “to renounce success and fame, and devote the rest of her life to the study of Theosophy” and in doing so fulfilled a “mystic prophecy.”\(^6\) As she explained to *The Times*:

> I am not setting up as a teacher of Theosophy. At this stage I am a student and nothing else. But I have never found anything so completely satisfying. Of course, you can’t convince people by arguing with them. There must be a personal experience. Every step of progress I have made in art both intellectually and emotionally I owe to theosophy. These things have always had an attraction for me from my earliest youth—as a child I was precociously religious; I have always felt that the work of my life—my whole life—must be something different from the practice of my art alone.\(^7\)

At the same time, Malcolm MacDonald emphasized in his seminal work on John Foulds that MacCarthy also had to abandon her career as a concert violinist because of neuritis.\(^8\) As she described herself: “rheumatic and neurotic conditions of the arms and hands” curtailed her career as a soloist but allowed her to continue to lead orchestras.\(^9\) Though Maud’s own account for her withdrawal and her subsequent life interests makes one think that her fascination for Theosophy was more important than her neuritis, most likely the two reasons combined resulted in her metamorphosis.

MacCarthy became a follower of the then newly appointed president of the Theosophical Society, Annie Besant, for whom she already for some time had “a profound reverence.” Until then however she had met Besant only briefly for three times, of which the longest meeting “lasted only half an hour” and took place after she quit her violin career.\(^10\) Even so, something happened between the two because Besant invited her to come to India. Here, besides her great interest in Theosophy, the fact that MacCarthy was an outspoken feminist might have played a role. In 1908, the two toured together in India, where MacCarthy collected and transcribed Indian folk songs: “a vast