

JOHN WILLIAM PEIRCE

1894-1960

John Peirce was appointed to the Vassar Music Department in 1928 by Professor George Coleman Gow whose initials turn on the vane above Skinner Hall. For 32 years, until his death on April 20, 1960, John Peirce taught the art of singing, the art of understanding song, and the art of group singing. He took part, with deliberation and with devotion, in the life of the college and the community, His kindliness and his integrity, the open hospitality of his home, came to be community assets, depended on and taken for granted. His work produced substantial results, opening professional careers in music to a score of young women, providing private resources of delight for hundreds of others. Two unpretentious books, *The Art of Program Making*, 1951, *The Art of Singing*, 1956, record some of the principles behind his skill as a teacher of voice, and his wide knowledge of the literature of song, his taste that ranged discriminatingly from folk song to lieder, from opera to contemporary cantata. The devotion of several thousand Glee Club members bears witness to his personal success as a choral director.

He was born in 1894, in West Newbury, Massachusetts. He received his early musical education through private instruction in and near Boston, particularly in voice work with Stephen Sumner Townsend, a teacher well known in 1910, and later in work on oratorio under Emil Mollenhauer, the director of the Boston Mendel and Haydn Society. The accounts of his early years are full of activities connected with church music, as quartet member, soloist or musical director in Unitarian, Baptist, Universalist, Presbyterian or Congregational churches in eastern Massachusetts. The roster of his recitals begins in 1914, with an appearance at the Second Congregational Church in West Newbury, and includes a debut recital at Steinert Hall in Boston, later recitals in larger Boston halls, appearances with the Boston Symphony, the Boston Choral Music Society, and many concerts throughout New England and Nova Scotia. In these years he was a member of the friendly circle of Boston musicians which included such well known artists and teachers as Arthur Foote, Charles Loeffler and Thomas Whitney Suretto.

In 1924 he was appointed by Ernest Bloch as head of the voice department at the Cleveland Institute of Music, where he remained for three years. In 1927 he went to Europe for a year of concentrated study, of phonetics, theory, conducting and voice, working for many months in Paris with the great French tenor Edmond Clement, and later in London with Sir George Henschel. He came to Vassar upon his return from Paris, and soon began to take part in the musical life of the Hudson Valley as he

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had taken part in that of the Morrimac as a younger man.

He became director of music at the First Presbyterian Church

in Poughkeepsie; for eleven years he supervised a public school music festival held at the college; he served as president of the Dutchess County Musical Association from 1942-1949. He took part with gusto in faculty productions of Gilbert and Sullivan, Trial by Jury and The Princess Ida. During various summers he directed choral work, taught Voice and Advanced Choral Conducting at the University of Vermont, and once, in 1933, at the University of Washington. He spent 1936-37 in Munich, again working concentratedly on phonetics, voice, opera end, this time, on German style. In 1940 he suffered a severe heart attack. Thereafter, his activities were restricted to winters of work and summers of rest, but the ten years which to was granted to live were years of continued growth and fresh achievement in musical understanding, and in self realization.

John Peirce was a New Englander in grain. As the oldest son of a widely known village doctor in a region where the town meeting and the church are still living institutions, he came naturally by his sense of personal responsibility, his concern with individuals, with their healthy growth and their participation in satisfying social activity. Generations of students will remember his patient persistence in seeking for their individual quality of vocal expressiveness, in guiding them through the literature of music towards the development of their own taste. Generations of Glee Club members will recall the pleasure of discovering the existence of Monteverdi, Ramoau, Gluck and Haydn, through singing in the choral productions of Orfeo, or Iphigenis in Tauris, of Castor and Pollux or The Creation - ambitious projects which he undertook with his Club in the belief that to bear a small modest part in a large beautiful work was good for mind and body. John Peirce was not an attenuated esthete; his familiar slouch and the hunch of his shoulder reminded those who knew, that in his youth he was a soul-professional pitcher, that his passion for baseball and his devotion to the Boston Red Sox kept him by the radio for hours during the playing season. Tennis, too, was an avocation, at which he raised his three sons, one by one, to beat him. He was happy to be sociable. With unaffected cordiality he and Mrs. Peirce opened their doors, put their house at others' disposal, offered simple meat and drink, comfort and laughter. The greatest contribution of his teaching is probably to have sent out into the community scores of women able to be leaders and sharers in musical enterprises in their towns and cities; his greatest contribution to Poughkeepsie is perhaps the range of his local friendships.

His Glee Club work was his greatest pleasure. he particularly enjoyed the preparation of Mendelssohn's Elijah, for this year's final concert; he had sung it in Boston, in his early years of

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concentrating; he heard, though he did not direct, the fine production of it in Boston, four days before his death. The performance of it at Vassar on May 7, which was to have been in his honor upon his retirement, will be the appropriate memorial.

Homer Pearson
Mildred Campbell
Barbara Swain
XV - 243 - 244