

Publications & Press Releases

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The First Lady *New Book Tells Story of Pioneering Broadway Composer Kay Swift*

by Steven Richman

"FINE AND DANDY: THE LIFE AND WORK OF KAY SWIFT," by Vicki Ohl (Yale University Press, 2004).

Vicki Ohl has written an excellent, important and timely book, the first full biography of a woman who experienced and contributed to the golden age of American song.



Composer Kay Swift (left) with George Gershwin.

Ohl's eminently readable work is thoroughly researched and lively, with plenty of musical examples and analysis. A pianist herself, the author is well suited to the task. She fleshes out much of the personal and biographical information Kay Swift had related to me when we collaborated on several Gershwin concerts I conducted at Lincoln Center in the late 1980's.

Swift's generation of artists wrote popular and jazz-influenced music, and musicals, in response to their time's cultural changes, very much in the tradition of the European classics.

Kay's ebullient, warm, generous, compassionate and positive personality, which she partially attributed to her mother, got her through her share of personal difficulties.

The book does well at portraying the cultural and creative flavor of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley, along with the more classical side of artists in New York and Hollywood during the 20th century's early decades.

"Fine and Dandy" is a valuable addition to the literature about this lively era. The story of a unique personality in a vibrant time, it's a must read.

A BROADWAY PIONEER

The first woman composer of a complete Broadway show, "Fine and Dandy" (1930), Swift is also known for her close personal and professional relationship with George Gershwin.

Katharine Swift (1897-1993) was the daughter of music critic Samuel Swift, who died when she was 17. Kay grew up in New York City, surrounded by music and the arts, though "unencumbered by wealth," in her granddaughter Katharine Weber's phrase.

Kay's mother was a cultured and spirited Englishwoman whom her father had met on an ocean liner returning to the U.S.

Kay attended performances at the Metropolitan Opera from a young age, where she met no less than Puccini and Humperdinck. She was a classically trained pianist and composer, having attended the Institute of Musical Art (predecessor of Juilliard) and later studied composition with Charles Martin Loeffler in Boston.

In 1917, she met Bettina Warburg, of the prominent German-American banking family, who invited her to tea at the Warburg home in Hartsdale, New York. There she met Bettina's brother James Paul Warburg, who was to become the youngest head at the time of a bank in the United States.

James' father, Paul M. Warburg, helped set up the Federal Reserve for Woodrow Wilson. James was named for his uncle James Loeb, who was a founder of the Institute of Musical Art.

James and Katharine married in 1918 at her family's modest brownstone apartment at 309 West 101st Street (since destroyed), on the Upper West Side.

Their union was characterized by extensive socializing with the cultural and social elite, including Averell Harriman and Jascha Heifetz, at their townhouse on East 70th Street.

GETTING ALONG WITH GERSHWIN

A fateful meeting in 1925 with George Gershwin, who, along with his brother Ira, had been invited to a party Katharine threw for Heifetz, changed Kay's life.

Although the Warburgs had a rather open marriage, somewhat typical of their Gatsby-ish, "Roaring Twenties" lifestyle, Jimmy apparently was more discreet.

Kay had become rehearsal pianist for Rodgers and Hart's "A Connecticut Yankee" on Broadway in 1927, which took considerable time from her family responsibilities; however, it was her affair with Gershwin that broke up the marriage in 1934.

The relationship with Gershwin also caused great tension with her three somewhat neglected young daughters.

In 1930, in the middle of the affair, Swift and Warburg managed to collaborate on "Fine and Dandy," she writing the music, and he the lyrics, under the pen name Paul James.

"Fine and Dandy" was quite successful, second only in its Broadway run to the Gershwins' "Girl Crazy."

Interestingly, Gershwin was a frequent guest at the Warburgs' Connecticut estate, Bydale, where he orchestrated "An American in Paris." This gives the lie to those who question whether Gershwin actually did his own orchestrations. (Kay once told me, "I watched him do it!")

Katharine, who changed her name to Kay at Gershwin's suggestion, was also instrumental in Gershwin's composition and orchestration of "Porgy and Bess," and she helped him with technical matters, such as counterpoint.

Kay copied parts and was privy to the folk opera's creation. She attended auditions, as well as the tryouts in Boston and the premiere in New York.

SONGS FOR THE ROCKETTES, AND MORE

In 1934, Swift, at the suggestion of Gershwin, who had turned it down, received the first commission by the founders of the American Ballet for their opening night performance, choreographed by Balanchine. Titled "Alma Mater," it was premiered in Hartford, Connecticut.

Unfortunately, the composer could not attend, since she was in Reno, Nevada, to obtain a divorce from Warburg.

Following three Hartford performances, the ballet was performed at the Adelphi Theatre and Lewisohn Stadium in New York, and at the Robin Hood Dell in Philadelphia.

The following year Kay was hired as one of the first staff composers at the new Radio City Music Hall. Besides the many songs she wrote for the Rockettes, she also composed "Song for String Quartet."

Following Gershwin's tragic death in Hollywood from a brain tumor in 1937, Kay became director of light music at the New York 1939 world's fair, where she met a cowboy whom she married, and moved to Oregon to live on a ranch.

She wrote an autobiographical novel about it, tellingly called "Who Could Ask for Anything More?" which was made into the 1950 movie "Never a Dull Moment," with Irene Dunne and Fred MacMurray.

Swift eventually divorced but married for a third time, living out the rest of her life in an apartment at 59th Street and First Avenue.

She collaborated on the film score "The Shocking Miss Pilgrim" (1947) with Ira Gershwin (based on George's unused manuscripts), wrote the Broadway review "Paris '90," as well as radio scripts, "Theme and Variations for Cello and Piano," and for industrial shows, among other projects.

She also kept the Gershwin flame alive by giving lectures and interviews, though always remaining discreet when discussing their relationship.

A NEW RECORDING

In conjunction with the new biography, PS Classics has released the premiere recording of "Fine and Dandy" on CD. The cast includes Andrea Burns, Mario Cantone, Carolee Carmello, Gavin Creel, Mark Linn-Baker, Jennifer Laura Thompson, Deborah Tranelli and Anne Kaufman, with an orchestra conducted by Aaron Gandy, which brings the inventive and delightful show to life.

Much of the original materials having been lost, Swift, with orchestrator Russell Warner, reconstructed the musical in the 1980's. (Warner completed the work after Swift's death.) Several of Swift's standards, including "Can't We Be Friends?" in jazz/cabaret versions by Natalie Douglas, John Pizzarelli and Jessica Molaskey, Jack Donahue, and Ann Hampton Callaway, are included.

As stylish as they are, I would have preferred that the songs had been done as originally written.

Kay expressed the wish that excessive liberties not be taken: "Give me one clean chorus. Let me hear it once the way I wrote it." One hopes that a revival of "Fine and Dandy" will soon be in the works. It's a charming winner, just like its composer. Kay Swift was some remarkable lady.

Steven Richman is the Grammy-nominated conductor of Harmonie Ensemble/New York and the Dvorak Festival Orchestra of New York.