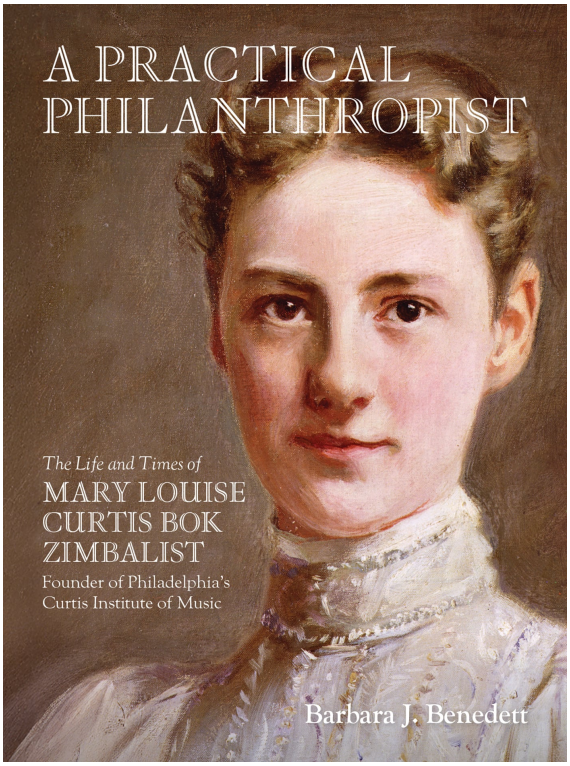
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A Practical Philanthropist

The Life and Times of Mary Louise Curtis Bok Zimbalist, Founder of Philadelphia's Curtis Institute of Music

Barbara J. Benedett

Contributions by Victoria Bok

Contributions by Arnold Steinhardt

ISBN	9781735600178
Publisher	Bauer and Dean Publishers
Binding	Hardback
Territory	USA & Canada
Size	7.5 in x 10 in
Pages	768 Pages
Illustrations	7 color, 105 b&w
Price	$35.00

- An important addition to scholarship on the critical work of women who helped build this nation
- Published on the 150th anniversary of Mary Curtis's birth, this fascinating story, particularly relevant during America's 250th birthday celebration, will appeal to anyone who loves American history, and especially to musicians, opera lovers, and aficionados of chamber and symphony orchestra music
- Includes never-before-published details about the founding of the Curtis Institute of Music, the early faculty and power struggles among department heads, and the inner workings of the school's first two decades.
- The Settlement Music School plays a major part in the telling of Mary's story, as does the school's short-lived conservatory and the inspired musician behind its inception, Johan Grolle
- Mary's many associations are brought to light, especially her close friendships with pianist Josef Hofmann, conductor Leopold Stokowski, and pianist Olga Samaroff; her second marriage to violinist Efrem Zimbalist, a longtime Curtis faculty member; and her interactions with famed concert manager and agent Arthur Judson, Boston Symphony Orchestra music director and founder of Tanglewood, Serge Koussevitzky, major music patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, and Philadelphians Henry and Sophie Drinker, among many others.
- Her involvement with cherished institutions like the Philadelphia Orchestra and the Philadelphia Grand Opera Company, as well as the establishment of the music scene in Rockport and Camden, Maine, are also put on record
- Widely recognized beyond Rittenhouse Square, Mary was awarded the Knight's Cross, First Class, of the Austrian Order of Merit in 1935, by the country considered by many the cradle of classical music "in grateful thanks of the Austrian people for [her] work in the world of music."
- Woven into the narrative are excerpts from correspondence between Mary and her colleagues, friends, and family, revealing the intimate goings-on behind the scenes while animating the voice and thoughts of this remarkable woman, a traditionalist born in the last quarter of the nineteenth century who embraced modern ideas
- Her philanthropy also expanded into theater, through her friendships with well-known actors of the day, Eva Le Gallienne, Annie Russell, and Francis B. Wilson.
- A visionary who embraced the tenets of practical philanthropy, Mary dedicated her phenomenal wealth to improving individual lives through the engaged charitable approach recognized for creating environments that lead to the sustained betterment of society
- Mary invested heavily in civic improvements within her communities: Rockport and Camden, Maine, where her family summered; Lake Wales, Florida, where her first husband, Edward Bok, created Bok Tower; and Merion, Pennsylvania, where she raised her children, Curtis and Cary Bok
- The book features a foreword by esteemed violinist Arnold Steinhardt and a personal reminiscence by Mary's great-granddaughter, Victoria Bok, a lifelong music lover and current trustee of Curtis
- The biography is illustrated with rarely seen photographs from various repositories, including the Curtis Institute Archives
- Through a careful reexamination of innumerable letters, interviews, and other source materials, author Barbara Benedett has uncovered a rich and full life and, in the process, corrected an incomplete record, long flawed by oft-repeated stories that were unfounded or inaccurate.
- Among the archives accessed are historical collections in Camden, Maine; Bok Tower Gardens in Lake Wales, Florida; Harvard and Yale universities; the Historical Society of Pennsylvania; the Library Company of Philadelphia; the Library of Congress; the New York Public Library; and the University of Maryland
- Mary's profound connection to music and her perspective on life are evident by her many quoted words throughout the book: In 1930, at age fifty-three, Mary wrote to Nela Młynarska Münz, who would later marry pianist Arthur Rubinstein: "I used to put [music] first. Now I know that life comes first and that Music's mission is to interpret life [and] also to give us the inspiration and heart to bear life." Almost two decades later, at the age of seventy-one, Mary wrote to artist Jules André Smith: "I find that everyday living should be—and occasionally can be—a fine art."

Born at the height of the country's centennial celebration, Mary Louise Curtis was raised by industrious New Englanders who built *Ladies' Home Journal* into the most widely read magazine in America. Aside from immense wealth, Mary's parents bestowed upon their only child a sophisticated understanding of music that would lead to her hands-on involvement in the Settlement Music School in Philadelphia and the founding of the world-renowned Curtis Institute of Music. Woven into the narrative are excerpts from Mary's correspondence, divulging the intimate goings-on behind the scenes while animating the voice and thoughts of this remarkable woman. **Barbara Benedett** reveals never-before-published details, which will intrigue those steeped in America's musical history. The book also explores Mary's work as a philanthropist, both within musical circles and well beyond. A strong advocate of practical philanthropy, Mary worked tirelessly throughout her life to help many individuals and communities. Through Benedett's exhaustive research and a careful reexamination of innumerable letters, interviews, and other source materials, this notable American philanthropist finally emerges from the shadows, and her immeasurable generosity, business acumen, and vision are fully acknowledged.

Barbara Benedett is senior archivist at the Rock Resource Center, Curtis Institute of Music, where she has been working with the collections since 2012. She holds an MLS from Clarion University and a BS from Drexel University, as well as a BM in music education and an MM in clarinet performance from the University of Delaware. During her twenty years as a music educator, Benedett was assistant director of Early Childhood Programs at the Mary Louise Curtis branch of the Settlement Music School, head of the woodwind department at the Music School of Delaware, and adjunct clarinet faculty at the University of Delaware. In 2025, Benedett was invited to present her research related to this book at the James Loeb Musical World conference in Germany; her paper will be published by Harvard University as part of the conference proceedings. Benedett is currently a member of Delaware Valley Archivists Group, the Society of American Archivists, and the Mid-Atlantic Regional Archivist's Conference. She lives in South Philadelphia and is available for interviews and lectures.

Published 17th Nov 2026