

RHIANNON MATHIAS

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LUTYENS,
MACONCHY,
WILLIAMS AND
TWENTIETH-CENTURY
BRITISH MUSIC

A Blest Trio of Sirens



An **Ashgate** Book

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TWENTIETH-CENTURY BRITISH MUSIC

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RHIANNON MATHIAS

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Introduction

Part of the title of this book is intended to resonate with a piece composed by Hubert Parry, one of the father figures of the so-called British Musical Renaissance.¹ His *Blest Pair of Sirens (At a Solemn Music)*, a setting of Milton's ode for chorus and orchestra, was commissioned and premiered by Charles Villiers Stanford's Bach Choir in 1887. The piece established Parry as the leading choral composer of his day and was written while the composer was Professor of Composition and Music History at the then newly founded Royal College of Music in London. It was a favourite piece of his pupil Ralph Vaughan Williams – another seminal renaissance figure – who, in turn, became the teacher of Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–94) and Grace Williams (1906–77) at the Royal College in the late 1920s. Elisabeth Lutyens (1906–83), an exact College contemporary of this blest pair, has been added to form a trio.

It was in this stimulating college environment that the three young students were able to absorb the ideals and musical values of their British musical heritage. This remarkable trio would go on to make different, but important, contributions to British music, extending the themes of the renaissance initiated by Parry and Stanford further into the twentieth century. At the same time, Lutyens, Maconchy and Williams belonged to a new generation of British composers – including Michael Tippett (1905–98) and Benjamin Britten (1913–76) – who were also strongly influenced by continental musical developments. Lutyens became, not without controversy, one of the first English composers to embrace 12-note music; Maconchy's sophisticated personal idiom was inspired by both continental and local influences; and Williams emerged as one of the first professional composers from Wales to assimilate aspects of her Welsh cultural heritage into a cosmopolitan and individual musical style.

While the compositional styles of these three composers evolved independently and in different ways – very much reflecting the major trends in twentieth-century British music – there were common themes that bound their lives together, not least the challenge of being a woman in a predominantly male profession. In the

¹ The 'British Musical Renaissance' is a phrase commonly applied to the emergence of a new school of British composers in the period 1880–1914: the movement is also often referred to as the 'English Musical Renaissance'. Most accounts tend to take the first performance of Parry's cantata *Scenes from Shelley's Prometheus Unbound* at the Gloucester Festival in 1880 as a starting point for the Renaissance. Parry, Stanford and Alexander Mackenzie, principal of the Royal Academy of Music, were generally thought to be the leading figures in the new movement.

nineteenth century, a few women had succeeded in establishing careers in Britain as composers (particularly of popular songs), but opportunities had been limited at a time when women were simply not encouraged to take up composition as a serious pursuit.² The formidable Ethel Smyth (1858–1944) proved to be an isolated exception. The daughter of a general in the Royal Artillery, Smyth studied at the Leipzig Conservatoire and composed a Mass in D which was performed at the Royal Albert Hall, London in 1893. *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* noted that 'this work definitely placed the composer easily at the head of all those of her own sex'.³ Yet this fact seemed to be the one that provoked the most outrage. By Smyth's own account, 'the Press went for the Mass almost unanimously – some with scorn, some with aversion, in all cases adopting a tone of patronage it was hardest of all to bear'.⁴ Although her music was later championed in England by Thomas Beecham and Henry Wood,⁵ Smyth also achieved a distinctive profile as an ardent campaigner for women's suffrage. She contributed a *March of the Women* (1911) to the cause which was frequently heard in London as an accompaniment to women's marches: on one occasion, the piece was famously conducted by the composer with a toothbrush from the window of a cell in Holloway Prison. Such a detail seems beside the point but for the fact that Smyth inevitably became better known as a celebrity and campaigner in England rather than as a serious composer.⁶

Smyth's musical accomplishments and involvement in the most acrimonious years of the campaign for women's suffrage did, however, prepare the ground for the young women who reached student age in the first decades of the twentieth century. Lutyens, Maconchy and Williams were among a number of young, highly gifted women – including Dorothy Gow (1893–1982), Imogen Holst (1907–84), Helen Glatz (née Hunter) (1908–96) and Helen Perkin (1909–96) – who studied composition at the Royal College in the late 1920s. It was not unusual for the College to have women music students – both the Royal College and the Royal Academy of Music were co-educational institutions – but it was remarkable to have several women studying composition at the same time. Significantly, although Smyth's music did not have any direct influence on the three composers' creative development, they were acutely aware of the impact the women's suffrage

² For a detailed discussion, see Sophie Fuller, *The Pandora Guide to Women Composers: Britain and the United States, 1629–Present* (London: HarperCollins, 1994).

³ *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (Fifth Edition), ed. E. Blom (London: Macmillan, 1954), vol. vii, p. 860. Note that this comment originally appeared in Smyth's entry in the Second Edition of *Grove's Dictionary*, ed. J.A. Fuller-Maitland (London: Macmillan, 1900).

⁴ Smyth, *As Time Went On ...* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1936), p. 172.

⁵ Beecham conducted the English premiere of her third opera *The Wreckers* (1903–04) at His Majesty's Theatre, London on 22 June 1909.

⁶ 'This is celebrity indeed! ... but it does not alter the fact that after having been on the job, so to speak, for over forty years, I have never yet succeeded in becoming even a tiny wheel in the English music machine'. Smyth, *As Time Went On*, pp. 288–289.

movement had had on attitudes in society. As a teenager, Lutyens received some early encouragement in her aspiration to be a composer from her aunt Lady Constance Lytton, who was both a fine musician and a suffragette. Maconchy believed that the emancipation of women had ‘started earlier in England than anywhere else’, and that the resulting shift of perspective helped to account for the fact that there were ‘more women composers [of about the same age] in Great Britain than anywhere else’.⁷ When asked if any woman composer had influenced her, Williams later recalled:

It’s strange but there was no central guru or Svengali figure who’d sparked off all the girl composers who emerged in the 1920s or 30s. The woman composer who might have influenced me as a child was Cécile Chaminade whose pieces everyone played and whose picture adorned the cover of one of them. I seem to remember curls, luminous eyes and lace. Very different from Dame Ethel’s rough tweeds! ... I discovered that she and Ethel were born within a year of each other in the 1850s, and this I find intriguing because it seems to link up with what Elizabeth Maconchy said about our generation of women composers – all of us coming at roughly the same time. It’s as though the muse has been putting us on trial, waiting to see how we shaped before launching some more of us.⁸

The first part of this book opens at the Royal College of Music in the 1920s. Maconchy and Williams won most of the College’s composition prizes and scholarships between them, and formed their own composers’ club – other members included Imogen Holst and Dorothy Gow – where they were able to discuss contemporary music and to receive useful comments and criticisms about their own pieces. Lutyens was not part of this particular circle. She had a different teacher at college and her priority at this stage was to acquire a solid compositional technique. All three students, however, found the conservatism of College attitudes striking. Lutyens recalled that ‘the great modern hero was Brahms’⁹ during her time there and that most contemporary music from the Continent tended to be viewed with suspicion. Interestingly, the forceful originality of Bartók, whose work first became known in Britain in the late 1920s, struck a chord within: all three young composers wrote early pieces that reveal an awareness of his music.

The second chapter considers the composers’ transition from music student to professional composer, and details their first experiences of the world of public concerts, broadcasts, music critics and publishers. After graduating, all three were confronted by the daunting question – what next? The young, unknown British composer faced enormous challenges at this time in a country that lacked both

⁷ Maconchy in ‘Women as Composers’ (BBC radio broadcast, 2 August 1973) [National Sound Archive (NSA) Catalogue Number: BBC Archive Cprd name: 60417 (1)].

⁸ Williams in ‘Women as Composers’, *ibid.*

⁹ Lutyens in interview with Stephen Plaistow (BBC Radio 3, 5 July 1971) [NSA Cat. No. P654R BD 1].

the institutional infrastructure to support new creative work and audiences for contemporary music. As Maconchy later recalled, ‘in London in the 1920s no one had given a thought to helping a composer to establish himself – let alone herself – or even to learn the craft of composition by hearing his work performed’.¹⁰ Lutyens complained about this situation to friends in 1931 and suggested that composers should find a way of putting on performances of their own works. Her idea gave birth to the launch of the ground-breaking Macnaghten–Lemare Concerts, an enterprising series which provided a platform for music by a new generation of British composers. All three composers had new work premiered at some of these concerts in the 1930s – often heard alongside new pieces by other unknown youngsters such as Britten, Tippett, Gerald Finzi and Alan Rawsthorne. The importance of these concerts should not be underestimated. More than 30 British composers had pieces performed during the first six years of the series, and as the musicologist Sophie Fuller has noted, ‘the fact that, unlike Smyth, the later generation of women composers has been taken seriously and has achieved a fair degree of success must be largely due to the opportunities and encouragement that they found in the Macnaghten–Lemare concerts’.¹¹

Part II of the book discusses the composers’ musical development in the years 1935 to 1955 and considers the impact the Second World War had on their careers. By 1935 all three had begun to establish themselves in the musical world, but their particular musical paths and idioms would begin to diverge in the ensuing years. In recognition of this broadening out, each composer is discussed in a separate chapter. Chapter 3 considers the nature of Lutyens’s radical breakthrough in the 1930s, and her first use of 12-note technique in pieces such as the Chamber Concerto No. 1 (1939–40). While many of her pieces of the 1940s were marked by an attempt to refine her technical skills, she also revealed that she possessed a rare musical versatility, one which could at once encompass the tonal narratives of the ebullient orchestral suite *En Voyage* (1944) and the uncompromising brand of serialism encountered in the Sixth String Quartet (1952).

Chapter 4 examines the way in which Maconchy chose to develop her distinctive musical voice. She found the string quartet to be an ideal medium for the expression of her ideas. Quartet writing enabled her to deal ‘with the bones of music’,¹² as she put it, and it is evident from the five big-boned quartets she wrote – Quartets Nos. 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 (1936–50) – that she was continuously refining her contrapuntal writing in order to meet this challenge. Her work was not, however, confined to chamber music and she composed for other genres throughout this period.

¹⁰ Maconchy, ‘The Composer Speaks’ (BBC Radio 3, 17 October 1971) [NSA Cat. No. M4263W C1].

¹¹ Fuller, ‘“Putting the BBC and T. Beecham to shame ...”: The Macnaghten–Lemare Concerts in the Thirties’, BMus diss. (King’s College, London, 1988), p. 21.

¹² Maconchy, ‘Composer’s Portrait’ (BBC Third Programme, 15 June 1966) [NSA Cat. No. 1CDR0003352 BD3–BD6 NSA].

Whereas Lutyens and Maconchy initially chose to explore the medium of chamber music, Williams preferred to work with larger canvases. The *Fantasia on Welsh Nursery Tunes* (1939–40), a work of bold and colourful tonal contrasts, revealed her prodigious flair for orchestral writing. This piece was largely responsible for bringing her name to the attention of a wider public, and it was followed a few years later by the equally popular *Sea Sketches* for string orchestra (1944). Wales was a natural source for her creativity (both musically and imaginatively) and many, although not all, of her works were inspired by Welsh sources. Pieces discussed in Chapter 5 include her First Symphony (1942–43) – the first modern symphony to be written by a composer from Wales – and the elegant choral suite *The Dancers* (1951).

The third and final part of this book considers the composers' mature works – again, discussed in three separate chapters. Given the combined quantity of pieces, I have chosen to focus on core works and pieces that I consider to be of particular interest. Chapter 6 considers some of the most significant pieces Lutyens wrote between the years 1955 and 1983, the period in which she experienced her greatest critical success. She had now attained a new level of technical command, and her extraordinary compositional fluency – to some extent enhanced by her experiences of meeting tight deadlines for film companies – enabled her to produce over 140 compositions (in all genres ranging from a meticulously timed four-minute brass fanfare to a two-hour opera). Some of her most salient works were composed for the voice and include *The Valley of Hatsu-Se* (1965), an exquisite setting of Japanese poems, and the remarkably poignant *And Suddenly It's Evening* (1966).

Maconchy composed over 100 pieces between the years 1955 and 1994, and continued to explore new musical territory on her own terms. The string quartet remained at the very centre of her art, and, following a break of several years after her Quartet No. 7 (1955), she returned to the medium, composing the Quartets Nos. 8–13 (1966–83). Vocal works now formed an increasingly significant part of her output and during the late 1950s she turned to opera, composing three one-act chamber operas. Chapter 7 concludes with discussions of the masterly *Epyllion* for cello and string orchestra (1975) and the striking vocal cycle *My Dark Heart* (1984).

Williams always insisted on very high standards in her own work and composed some 40 pieces in the final decades of her life. Although her output appears relatively small, this should not necessarily imply that she lacked fluency. She was a compulsive reviser, one who constantly questioned the value of her art: from time to time, she would even 'make a bonfire of works' she considered 'beyond reprieve'.¹³ Chapter 8 explores the music Williams composed between 1955 and 1977, the period in which she underwent her most exciting creative phase. She broke new ground with *Penillion* for orchestra (1955), an original adaptation of some of the metrical and melodic characteristics of a traditional

¹³ Williams, 'Composer's Portrait' (BBC Radio 3, 19 February 1976), transcribed in 'Grace Williams: A Self Portrait', *Welsh Music* 8/5 (Spring 1987), p. 14.

Welsh vocal practice, and her expanded musical vocabulary now energized other orchestral works such as the compelling *Symphony No. 2* (1956). In common with Lutyens and Maconchy, she became more interested in writing vocal music in her later years, and some of her most ambitious vocal/choral works, including the *Missa Cambrensis* (1968–71), date from this period. Her successful one-act opera *The Parlour* (1960–66) revealed that she possessed a great gift for dramatic stage works.

This book forms an essential part of any reading of twentieth-century British music. Throughout, I have attempted to enter into the spirit of the composers' time by including reactions to their music from critics, scholars, performers, friends and colleagues. I have also sought to let the composers speak for themselves as much as possible in the form of quotations from published writings, interviews and broadcast talks. What was it like to be a British composer in the twentieth century? And how did these composers respond to the often daunting professional challenges they faced? Although Lutyens, Maconchy and Williams each made a significant contribution to British music, their music was often misunderstood in their own lifetimes, and continues to suffer from neglect to this day. The playwright, music critic and feminist George Bernard Shaw once wrote that 'English society did not care about music – did not know good music from bad'.¹⁴ This, then, is a book about good music.

¹⁴ G.B. Shaw, *London Music in 1888–89 as heard by Corno di Bassetto* (London: Constable, 1937), p. 264.

PART I

1926–1935

Opening of *Sirens' Song* by Elizabeth Maconchy (1974)

Poco lento, liberamente (♩ = c.50-56)

Soprano 1

Soprano 2

Alto

Tenor

Bass

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One of the good works done by the Royal College of Music has been the evangelization of Kensington.

G.B. Shaw, *Music in London 1890–94* (London: Constable, 1932),
vol. 1, p. 153.

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Chapter 1

The Musical Evangelization of Kensington

The Royal College of Music lies at the heart of South Kensington. Situated in Prince Consort Road, its ornate red brick and terracotta facade – a cross between a cathedral and a Victorian folly – gazes at the curve of the Royal Albert Hall. Every aspect of this illustrious building is designed to be impressive. Originally conceived in 1853 by Prince Albert and Sir Henry Cole, two of the major forces behind the Great Exhibition of 1851, the foundation stone of the College was laid by Edward, Prince of Wales in 1890, and work was completed four years later. Designed by Arthur Blomfield and funded by the memorably named industrialist Samson Fox, the building owes its existence to the confidence, ambition and vision of the Imperial age. When you walk through the College's entrance you are immediately welcomed by alabaster statues of Edward, Prince of Wales (later Edward VII) and his bride Alexandra – a reminder, if one was needed, of the College's regal patrons and its distinguished history. But it is the vibrant 'hum' of the building that gives it a special distinction. Walk out of the main reception area into the labyrinth of dimly lit corridors, stairs and rooms, and you will be greeted by a cacophony of scales, arpeggios, arias and fragments of pieces from every period in music history. This ethereal fanfare, which appears to emanate from every nook of the building, accompanies you as you negotiate your way through swarms of students possessively clutching their double basses, French horns and mobile phones. And as you pass students busily practising in rooms, or rushing to their lessons, you realize that this concerted activity is merely part of one ordinary day for the College.

Passion, persistence and energy have always been fundamental 'Collegian' characteristics. After a temporary National Training School for Music was established in South Kensington in the late 1870s – transforming into the Royal College of Music in 1882 – residents in the area soon became aware of a dramatic rise in the temperature of the British musical climate.¹ Even the indomitable George Bernard Shaw, an astute music critic but never the greatest supporter of Royal institutions or the 'academic musician', noted with approval the link in the 1890s between the glowing musical talent on display in Kensington and the rapid improvement in standards in most areas of professional musical activity. A portrait by Shaw of one of the College's public concerts in March 1890 vividly captures the pioneering spirit of the young institution. He was enthralled by an invigorating performance of Brahms's Second Piano Concerto and made certain that news of

¹ The College was originally located nearby in Kensington before moving to its current building in 1894.

the Amazonian prowess of the young soloist spread fast. Miss Polyxena Fletcher played the piano ‘courageously and even aggressively’, and at the most intense moments of her performance ‘thumped the keyboard as if it were Brahms’ head. And she was quite right’, concluded a delighted Shaw: ‘why should she forbear at that age, with an orchestra thundering emulously in her ears?’²

Advancing age did not diminish this celebrated Collegian’s penchant for giving notable performances. Polyxena Fletcher continued to thump the nation’s pianos throughout her professional career – as a concert pianist and as one of London’s most prominent piano teachers. It is impossible to say how many pupils this ‘weird, grey, spinsterish figure’³ mesmerized with her robust piano playing. But to Elisabeth Lutyens, the 15-year-old daughter of the celebrated architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, her playing was astounding:

Polyxena Fletcher had genius ... and became the greatest single influence in my life [at that time]. Music, life and people were inseparable to her, and our lessons, which lasted hours and seemed timeless, were occupied as much with talk and discussion as piano playing. When the talk was of music it was from the widest and most all-embracing point of view and she became to me the yardstick by which to measure all my new intellectual and musical experiences and values of life.⁴

Lessons with Polyxena Fletcher must also have provided Lutyens with a bird’s-eye view of the musical world – its personalities, customs and expectations. Miss Fletcher possessed a hardy sense of humour and regaled her pupil with amusing tales of musical life – of friendships and feuds, new musical discoveries and of the best and worst performances of Brahms, Mendelssohn and Schumann, the holy trinity of music at that time. She had studied privately in Vienna with the renowned piano teacher Theodor Leschetizky, and in all respects seemed to embody her teacher’s axiom ‘no art without life, no life without art’. Furthermore, like Lutyens’s own ‘Aunt Con’ (Lady Constance Lytton), Miss Fletcher’s mother had been a pupil of Clara Schumann, then a hallowed institution in England. These factors conspired to make Lutyens want to improve her piano skills so that she too might study abroad, gain entry to a music college and have a glittering career on the concert stage. Miss Fletcher, no doubt, impressed on her the work that would be required for this path – the hours of daily practice, the attention to tone, the detailed knowledge of pieces, the ability to make music and not noise. Yet Lutyens’s youthful dreams of becoming a concert pianist proved to be unrealistic: as she divulged 51 years later, ‘no amount of work has enabled me to play the

² Shaw, *London Music in 1888–89 as heard by Corno di Bassetto*, p. 328.

³ Lutyens’s first impression of Miss Fletcher as recounted in her autobiography *Goldfish Bowl* (London: Cassell, 1972), p. 18.

⁴ *Ibid.* Lutyens was also at this time having violin lessons with Miss Fletcher’s friend Marie Motto, another former Collegian, who was the leader of the English String Quartet.

piano better than a typist using one finger'.⁵ Even so, those mind-stretching hours spent with Polyxena Fletcher were not wasted. Eventually, Lutyens plucked up courage to show her teacher some of her 'secret' compositions and was rewarded with effusive encouragement and some badly needed harmony lessons.

Although Lutyens was grateful for the opportunities her piano teacher provided, Polyxena Fletcher must have seemed like a character from the distant past to this sophisticated and well-travelled teenager.⁶ Miss Fletcher's performance of Brahms's Concerto had taken place 16 years before Lutyens was born – at a time when the piece was only ten years old and its composer was still alive. Unlike the other teachers and governesses, however, Miss Fletcher had a flair for bringing history alive, and it was through her many enthralling tales that Lutyens probably first became acquainted with old Collegians such as Hubert Parry (1848–1918) and Charles Stanford (1852–1924); indeed, it was Stanford, the College's energetic professor of composition and orchestral playing, who had conducted that remarkable Brahms performance in 1890. Although Stanford achieved renown in his day as a composer and composition teacher – his extensive output includes the *Irish Symphony* (No. 3, 1887), several oratorios and a considerable amount of choral music – he was also a superb orchestral trainer. He continued to conduct the College orchestra until 1921 and his exacting standards and eruptive temperament ensured, as Parry noted, that College forces were led 'to brilliant victories times out of number'.⁷ Both Stanford and Parry had been recruited onto the College staff in 1883 by George Grove (1820–1900), a man whose life's work Shaw once described as having been 'of more value than that of all the Prime Ministers of the century'.⁸ Founding editor of the famous *Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and the College's first director, the visionary Grove sought to introduce ambitious and far-reaching reforms into British musical life.⁹ With Stanford and Parry appointed to key cabinet posts at the College, an agenda for national musical renewal was put into place. Known irreverently as 'the Mandarins, both within and outside the College, these men helped to nurture several fertile generations of English composers including Charles Wood, Gustav Holst, Ralph Vaughan Williams, John Ireland, Frank Bridge and Herbert Howells.

⁵ Ibid., p. 19.

⁶ Sir Edwin Lutyens was the government-appointed architect of New Delhi from 1912 to 1930. Elisabeth and her family visited India on several occasions, and she also accompanied her mother on Theosophy tours in Europe and Australia.

⁷ Parry as quoted in H.C. Colles and J. Cruft, *The Royal College of Music: A Centenary Record 1883–1983* (London: Royal College of Music, 1982), p. 19. By 1921 the College had three orchestras, 'to provide a ladder for players' attainment'. Adrian Boult succeeded Stanford as conductor of the first orchestra.

⁸ Shaw, *Music in London 1890–94*, vol. ii, p. 214.

⁹ Although famous as a musician, Grove trained as a civil engineer. Early on in his career he worked on the construction of Robert Stephenson's Britannia Bridge, a railway bridge linking the Isle of Anglesey with the Welsh mainland.

By the time Lutyens entered the College in 1926, Stanford and Parry belonged firmly to the past, but their influence lingered on in the curriculum, the performance repertoire and in the creed of the College.¹⁰ Through their activities as composers, scholars, administrators and teachers, they had helped to outline British borders on the musical map of Europe, and their achievements amounted to one of the first conscious strikes against Britain's unenviable image (both at home and abroad) as *das Land ohne Musik*. Victorian Britain had long assumed the superiority of continental composers and performers, and this, together with inadequate professional training opportunities for musicians in Britain, had created an acceptance that serious music of a high quality could not be home-grown.¹¹ The reasons for Victorian negative attitudes towards national music were complex, but evidence suggests that this was a distinctly local problem that was intimately connected with the class structure of British society. The musicologist Nicholas Temperley has argued, for example, that attitudes held by a musically philistine aristocracy were greedily embraced by the various lower echelons of the nineteenth-century British class structure, smothering any real sense of national musical growth. As he has stated:

Social emulation of the upper classes was the spur that energized the middle classes to the great achievements of the Victorian age. It was highly desirable, no doubt, in the army, and navy, the civil and colonial services, the law, medicine and business. It did no damage in the arts of the word: fiction, poetry, drama, oratory, where the English language naturally reigned. In music, emulation of the upper classes was disastrous, because they had long since downplayed its value and adopted foreignness as the shibboleth.¹²

With the emergence of new musical institutions, and renewed general interest in English folk song and the Elizabethan composers, music began to gain a certain 'respectability' in British society.¹³ Edward Elgar (1857–1934), the exceptional English composer of his day, was the first to break the mould when he achieved national prominence with works such as the *'Enigma' Variations* (1898–99), the

¹⁰ Parry succeeded Grove as Director of the College in 1894. Both he and Stanford remained at the College until their deaths.

¹¹ It is significant that some of the most prolific British composers of the second half of the nineteenth century – Sterndale Bennett, Arthur Sullivan, Frederick Cowen and Ethel Smyth, for example – had been trained at Mendelssohn's Leipzig Conservatoire.

¹² N. Temperley, 'Xenophilia in British Music History', in Bennett Zon (ed.), *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), vol. 1, p. 14.

¹³ Cecil Sharp (1859–1924), for example, was a major pioneering force in the collecting, publication and revival of English folk song and dance in the twentieth century. He founded the English Folk Dance Society in 1911, and this society was later amalgamated with the older Folk Song Society (founded in 1898) to form the English Folk Dance and Song Society.

oratorio *The Dream of Gerontius* (1899–1900) and the *Pomp and Circumstance Marches* Nos. 1–5 (1901–30). Yet although efforts were made by Elgar, Stanford, Parry and others to raise the profile of British music, change proceeded at a glacial pace. In 1926 it remained for a younger generation, notably Vaughan Williams, Holst and Ireland, to extend the themes of what had become loosely known as the ‘British Musical Renaissance’.¹⁴ The fight against a deeply engrained musical philistinism in Britain, however, would be long and difficult. Shortly before taking up his place at the Royal College in July 1930, for instance, a young Benjamin Britten was asked by a guest at a party what career he wished to pursue. He replied that he wanted to be a composer – to which the response was, ‘yes, but what else?’

Lutyens wanted to study composition with Vaughan Williams or Ireland, the College’s two most illustrious composition teachers, and was perturbed when Hugh Allen, the College’s smooth, autocratic Director, attempted to discourage her from studying composition as a first subject.¹⁵ Not only did he seem unimpressed with the examples of work she showed him in her interview but he also appeared ambivalent about the musical training she had received thus far: she had studied harmony and counterpoint in 1923 at the *École Normale de Musique* in Paris, and had also had some composition lessons from the English composer John Foulds. Allen eventually relented in the face of a persistent Lutyens (and possibly to avoid offending her well-connected parents). Although he refused to let her study with Vaughan Williams or Ireland, he did allow her take theory and composition with the organist and composer Harold Darke. As there was a dire shortage of viola players at the College, Lutyens was persuaded to take viola as her second study.¹⁶

Rake-thin, witty and idealistic, but prone to bouts of self-consciousness, Lutyens was grateful for the chance to further her musical aspirations. She felt herself to be different from her peers and initially found it difficult to adjust to College life. In truth, music had not always been her central focus. In keeping with the Theosophical doctrines embraced by her mother Lady Emily Lutyens, she had been brought up to chant quaint creeds, to be a strict vegetarian and to believe that only the life of ‘Krishna’ (Jiddu Krishnamurti), the chosen World Teacher of the new era, had any real meaning. The Theosophical Society had been founded in the

¹⁴ Elgar had an uncomfortable relationship with London-based colleagues such as Parry and Stanford. Although a champion of British music, his success and international profile owed nothing to the Renaissance movement.

¹⁵ Hugh Allen (1869–1946) was a quintessential Renaissance man and was highly regarded as a musician, conductor and administrator. He succeeded Parry as Director of the College in 1918.

¹⁶ Records confirm that Lutyens entered College in the middle of the Christmas term of 1926 and that she was registered to study theory (first study) with Darke and viola (second study) with Ernest Tomlinson [Register of Students 1926, Royal College of Music Archive (RCMA)]. Lutyens later concluded that Allen’s decision to send her to Darke had been a wise one. She possessed a raw but undisciplined talent for music but her grasp of technique was, by her own admission, weak at this stage of her development.

1870s by Helena Petrovna Blavastky, among others, and its promotion of a new world view found many followers in the English upper classes and throughout Europe during the first decades of the twentieth century. Lutyens's younger sister Mary described the dogmas that she and her siblings were brought up to believe:

Theosophy was the philosophy on which I was nurtured – that is, the belief in reincarnation and karma, that inexorable law by which you reap what you have sown of good and evil through a succession of lives (I was brought up to think of good and bad karma rather than of good or bad luck); the equality of all the great religions, and, since 1902, a conviction that the World Teacher was shortly to come back into incarnation. It was the great Lord Maitreya – he who had taken the body of Jesus 2000 years ago and had founded Christianity – who was, in the near future, to take the body of Krishna, my friend and almost-brother, and sow the seed of yet another religion.¹⁷

Lutyens spent a great deal of her adolescence being a reluctant disciple, following her adored, impressionable mother and Annie Besant to Theosophical Society meetings around the world. Indeed, between the years 1923 and 1925 alone, her musical interests were somewhat curtailed by extensive trips to the Austrian Tyrol, PerGINE in the Dolomites, Calcutta, Delhi, Adyar (the spiritual centre of the Theosophy world) and Sydney. In Sydney, while undergoing preparation to ascend the ladder of perfection in 1925, she and Mary were encouraged by Bishop Leadbeater, one of the Society's leaders, to float on the astral plane through meditation. Even her mother, now adrift in the vast, eternal mists of meditation, realized that her daughter might find it difficult 'to return to a normal world and keep English hours and adapt ... to English standards'.¹⁸ The strain of being part of this spiritual circus began to take its toll on Lutyens. As she recalled, Theosophy 'was having a devastating effect, in practice, on my physical and mental health', and she became 'quite frozen emotionally and incapable of any spontaneous reaction'.¹⁹ Ill health and a seriously agitated father prompted her to reassess her life.²⁰ Declining to accompany her mother and sister to a Theosophical retreat in California in 1926, and gaining entry to the Royal College of Music, were both part of the cure.

¹⁷ Mary Lutyens, *To Be Young: Some Chapters of Autobiography* (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1959), p. 13. The Theosophy movement had admirers in the music world. Both John Foulds (Elisabeth's one-time teacher) and Cyril Scott were declared theosophists, for example, and Raymond Head has suggested that theosophical ideas may also have had an influence on the music of Gustav Holst. See Head, 'Holst – Astrology and Modernism in "The Planets"', *Tempo* 187 (December 1993), pp. 15–22.

¹⁸ Lady Emily Lutyens, *Candles in the Sun* (London: R. Hart-Davis, 1957), p. 114.

¹⁹ Lutyens, *Goldfish Bowl*, p. 37.

²⁰ Edwin Lutyens was never a disciple of Theosophy and the family's involvement with the Society caused a serious rift between him and his wife.

Fortunately, Lutyens got on well with her theory tutor. Harold Darke (1888–1976) was generally regarded as being one of the finest English organists of his day. He was the organist of St. Michael's, Cornhill in the City of London and his regular Monday recitals at midday were frequently broadcast by the BBC in the 1920s and 30s. A former composition pupil of Stanford's, Darke also became known for his well-crafted organ and choral pieces, including his popular setting of the carol *In the Bleak Midwinter*. Thorough and scrupulous in his teaching methods, he took an interest in the unrefined exercises and pieces Lutyens brought to her Tuesday morning tutorials and encouraged her in her quest to acquire a solid musical technique. His interest bolstered her brittle confidence. She was also now beginning to make a few friends at College and became particularly close to Dorothy Gow, who had been studying composition at the College since 1924.²¹ Gentle and generous in character, Gow became a surrogate older sister to Lutyens and together they spent many hours poring over the details of their latest pieces.

As Lutyens began to settle into her new environment, she became aware that a number of her contemporaries had already achieved varying degrees of success for their compositions. In her first term she collided with a beautiful but 'disdainful' young man who had been hurrying out of the College's Parry Room Library. The man was Constant Lambert (1905–51), a former star Collegian, whose ballet *Romeo and Juliet* (1924–25) had recently been performed by Diaghilev's Ballet Russes in Monaco, Paris (where it caused a riot) and London.²² And it was in December 1926 that Lutyens probably first encountered the music of Elizabeth Maconchy at one of the coveted Patron's Fund rehearsals.

The Patron's Fund played an important role in College life. The Fund was instituted in 1903 by Ernest Palmer primarily to encourage young British composers by arranging professional performances of their works, but provision was also given for providing scholarships for further study abroad, publishing works and supporting British performers.²³ Although the Fund was administered by the College, and was primarily intended for past and present Collegians, it was open, in theory, to all British subjects. Each year, composers submitted pieces to the Fund's reading panel, and the best works were performed by professionals at either an orchestral concert during the summer term or a chamber concert at the end of the Christmas term. In 1919 these concerts were replaced by public rehearsals which were held in the College concert hall. Maconchy's *Fantasy* for flute, harp and string orchestra and *Elegy* for flute, horn and string orchestra were selected by the Fund's examiners in 1926, and on 10 December Adrian Boult and members of the London Symphony Orchestra rehearsed both works in a hall packed with students and visitors. Although it was the first time this 19-year-old composer had heard professional musicians perform her music, Maconchy was well prepared. The *Fantasy*, one of her earliest attempts at writing for larger

²¹ Dorothy Gow – Appendix.

²² Constant Lambert – Appendix.

²³ Ernest Palmer – Appendix.

instrumental forces, had been performed at a College concert earlier in July, and both works had received a run-through at a concert given the week before the big event. Admittedly, her pieces had received an unusual amount of attention and rehearsal time by ordinary College standards, but then Maconchy was not an average student. She had already started to collect a number of prizes and had had five pieces performed at the College in that year alone.²⁴ To have had *two* works selected by the Patron's Fund, however, placed her in an entirely different league from her peers. People at the College suddenly knew who she was; heads would turn in corridors as she walked past.

Maconchy had been totally unprepared for the life of a music student when she first entered the College in September 1923. She was much younger than most of the other students and was still grieving over the recent loss of her father.²⁵ Certainly, the accelerated tempo of College life and the emphasis placed on high, professional standards were in marked contrast to the sedate, amateur musical world she had known as a child. Maconchy was born in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire, but grew up in Ireland, her family's ancestral home. Her maternal grandfather Captain Poe was distantly related to the Domville family, owners of the Santry domain, near Dublin, and he acted as the executive and agent-in-residence of the family's magnificent Jacobean mansion Santry Court and its gardens. Although her parents Gerald and Violet Maconchy lived in Howth, overlooking Dublin Bay, she and her two sisters spent most of their childhood summers at Santry Court.

Maconchy's musical talent was noticed from the very start. Indeed, when her parents discovered their six-year-old daughter carefully picking out the sound of the church bells on the piano, they quickly sought advice from a local music teacher. Fascinated by the musical sound worlds she was discovering, Maconchy easily mastered her piano teacher's modest province of scales, arpeggios and small piano pieces. She was educated at home by a succession of governesses and, when not attending general lessons, would write her own piano pieces simply for pleasure. Such was her musical progress that she was sent for more advanced lessons to Mrs Boxhill, one of Dublin's most celebrated piano teachers, and, unusually for a girl at that time, to the Dublin-based composer and scholar John Larchet for harmony and counterpoint lessons.²⁶ After a time both teachers recommended that Maconchy go to London for further study. Her mother – by this time a young widow – decided that she would move to England with her three daughters so that Maconchy could study at the College.

Interestingly, despite her musical talent and specialist training, Maconchy's actual experience of music at this time was limited. Apart from her own activities

²⁴ Maconchy was awarded the following during her time at the College: Foli Scholarship (in 1926 and 1927), the Blumenthal Scholarship (1927 for two years), the Arthur Sullivan Prize (1928) and the Cobbett Prize (1929).

²⁵ Gerald Maconchy contracted tuberculosis during the First World War and died in 1921.

²⁶ John Larchet – Appendix.

there had been little music to be heard inside the house, and with a Dublin music scene largely devoid of professional opera companies, orchestras and chamber groups, opportunities to hear music had been scarce. Indeed, by the time she entered the College in 1923, she had attended only one orchestral concert.²⁷

It took her some time to find her feet. She took piano as her first study, with the pianist Arthur Alexander, and enjoyed her composition lessons with the distinguished Irish composer Charles Wood (1866–1926).²⁸ She also took theory as an extra study with the didactic harmonist Herbert Kitson – a very ‘dry old stick’ according to Maconchy;²⁹ indeed, in later years she and fellow Collegian Michael Tippett would swap amusing stories about Kitson’s good but terrifyingly rigid teaching methods. Both Maconchy and Tippett were particularly attracted to the string quartet form in their student days, an interest almost certainly encouraged by their teacher Charles Wood, himself the composer of eight quartets. Maconchy first heard a string quartet played at one of the College concerts put on by students and, enthralled by the intimacy and sonority of the medium, was eager to explore the form for herself. She would, undoubtedly, have written quartets in imitation of existing models as a means of learning her craft, but her *Suite for Strings* in E minor, a short piece of four contrasting movements, was one of the first pieces she wrote at College that she was later prepared to acknowledge. The work was performed at a concert in November 1924 by some of her student friends, a month after Tippett had his own *Suite for Strings* (in C major) performed by the same quartet group. Although exploratory in concept, Maconchy later came to regard this work as being ‘the first thing I wrote with a decidedly personal flavour’.³⁰

A breakthrough came in the Christmas term of 1925 when she was sent to Vaughan Williams for composition lessons. Every student would have been acutely aware of Vaughan Williams’s and Holst’s positions at the forefront of British musical life in the 1920s, and of their towering successes with works such as the *Fantasia on a Theme by Thomas Tallis* (1910, final rev. 1919) and *The Planets* (1914–16). Indeed, Maconchy must have first approached the front door of 13 Cheyne Walk, Chelsea – Vaughan Williams often taught his students from his London home – with a mixture of trepidation and excitement. Yet Vaughan Williams neither encouraged nor needed musical disciples and was always on the

²⁷ A performance of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony by the Hallé Orchestra in Dublin. See Maconchy, ‘Serenata Concertante – an analytical note’, in *Twenty British Composers* (London: Chester Music for the Feeney Trust, 1975), p. 50.

²⁸ Charles Wood – Appendix.

²⁹ Maconchy interviewed in the Channel 4 television documentary, ‘Elizabeth Maconchy: A Video Portrait’, directed and produced by Margaret Williams (Arbor International Productions and Arts Council of Great Britain, 1984).

³⁰ Maconchy, ‘Talk on String Quartets’ (Radio 3, 9 October 1976) [NSA Cat. No. NP2788AW C1]. Tippett’s *Suite for Strings* was performed at an informal College concert on 23 October 1924, and Maconchy’s *Suite for Strings* in E minor was premiered on 25 November 1924 [RCMA Concert Programmes].

side of the young. He believed that young composers should discover their true musical voices through trial, error and sheer hard work – just as he had done. Large and heavy with a shambling gait, the 53-year-old composer was totally devoid of conceit, possessed a vital individuality and had an unusually wide-ranging musical vision. The impact of his formidable personality on Maconchy was revelatory. ‘Everything suddenly opened out to me’, she recalled, ‘it was a whole new World when I became a pupil of his’.³¹ She later wrote about her experience of his unorthodox teaching methods:

[He] had little respect for the rules and conventional methods of teaching composition, and never followed a formal scheme.

The reason for this apparent lack of method was his complete rejection of ready-made solutions. ... His teaching, though he never said it in so many words – was always directed towards making his pupils think for themselves in their own musical language. He fully recognised the importance of an adequate technique, but for him the purpose of technique was how to give the clearest expression to the musical ideas of each individual composer in his own way. It is something for which there is no formula, and which cannot be learnt at second hand. He taught one to learn direct from the great music of the past – Bach, in particular, but many others too, and never from books.³²

From the 1920s onwards, Vaughan Williams’s music was often thought to epitomize a particular type of English national identity – one which was pastoral and, in the view of some, parochial. Although he held strong views about the regenerative value of national music (both past and present), the clumsy image of a parochial composer failed to do justice to his rich and multifaceted musical personality. Continental influences were crucial to Vaughan Williams’s development – he had studied at Leipzig and then briefly with Ravel in Paris – and his range of musical expression was such that it could encompass works as different as the *Pastoral Symphony* (No. 3, 1921) and the turbulent *Symphony No. 4* (1931–34). During Maconchy’s time at the College, he would often refer to the works he was writing, including his Piano Concerto (1926–31) and the operas *Sir John in Love* (1924–28), *Riders to the Sea* (1925–32) and *The Poisoned Kiss* (1927–29). She recalled seeing sections of the Blake-inspired masque *Job* (1927–30) as it began to emerge, and she acted as a répétiteur for some of the preliminary choral rehearsals of *Flos Campi* (1925). She also attended the College’s premiere of his ballad opera *Hugh the Drover* on 4 July 1924.³³ Muriel Nixon, who sang the lead role of Mary in the opera, was a friend, and Nixon went on to perform some of her songs at

³¹ Maconchy in conversation with John Skiba, *Composer* 63 (Spring 1978), p. 7.

³² Maconchy, ‘Vaughan Williams as a Teacher’, *Composer* 2 (1959), pp. 18–19.

³³ The first public performance of the opera took place on 14 July 1924 at His Majesty’s Theatre, Haymarket, London.

a College concert in March 1926.³⁴ These songs, together with other works she wrote at this time, naturally reflected the influence of her teacher, yet it would be wrong to assume that Vaughan Williams expected his pupil to seek a personal style which used English folk song and the Tudor composers as primary stimulants. Far from imposing his own style and philosophy, he actively encouraged Maconchy to respond and react to the different styles of contemporary music.

After Maconchy had been studying with Vaughan Williams for about a year, she discovered the music of Bartók which was then just beginning to be known in England. The radical and uncompromising nature of Bartók's early scores had an enormously liberating effect on her musical thinking. Significantly, his Piano Suite, Op. 14 (1916) was to be the only work she performed at College when she gave a piano recital in March 1927.³⁵ Her performance was flawless, but several elderly professors were seen to flinch violently in their seats at some of the dissonant, more acerbic gestures in the piece; indeed, some confusion arose at the time as to whether the pianist was playing the right notes.³⁶ Such responses simply served to highlight both the insularity of some sections of British musical life at this time, and the genuine bewilderment that often greeted contemporary musical developments from the Continent. Lutyens vividly captured the slightly stultifying atmosphere at College when she recalled that during her time there Brahms was still thought to be 'the god of *new* music'.³⁷ Bartók's reception in Britain was an interesting case. The composer visited London several times during the 1920s to perform his works, and his performances were, on the whole, greeted with a certain amount of hostility. Such was the furore created by Bartók's broadcast performances in 1927, for example, that it prompted the critic and broadcaster Percy Scholes to pen a deliciously verbose article in the *Radio Times* (9 December 1927) entitled 'Is Bartók Mad – Or Are We?':

A great many listeners have written to me about a recent programme of music by the Hungarian composer, Bela Bartók. The gist of many of the matters is a question – *Is Bartok Mad – or are we?* ...

There is nothing to be astonished at in it because there is nothing new. What he is doing, in the introduction of a new idiom, has been done several times before, and what people are now saying has always on such occasions been said ...

³⁴ Three of Maconchy's songs for soprano and piano – 'The Call', 'There is a Lady Sweet and Kind' and 'My Sweet Sweeting' – was performed by Nixon on 11 March 1926. [RCMA Concert Programmes].

³⁵ Maconchy played Bartók's Suite on 1 March 1927 [RCMA Concert Programmes].

³⁶ A detail provided by Nicola Lefanu, Maconchy's daughter, in interview with the author.

³⁷ Lutyens, *Goldfish Bowl*, p. 38.

I am not very sure, but I *believe* that Bartók is a great composer. I am very sure that he is a clever one. I have a suspicion that what has been wrong with listeners who have written to protest against Bartók's music has been, in the main, not Bartók's composing but their hearing. *The human ear is a very conservative member.*

Scholes received hundreds of letters from listeners in response to his article, some of which were published in subsequent issues of the *Radio Times*. One Eric Lewis of Chelsea thought that Bartók's 'originality must, I suppose, be offensive to the average British listener whose favourite musical diet is Faust and Schubert's *Unfinished*'. Arguing that the modern music 'treatment' had been rather 'too drastic' in recent months, he suggested that if 'Bartók, Stravinsky and Co.' (*sic*) were to be 'administered in somewhat smaller doses' by the BBC, 'it might be possible to persuade the patients "to keep them down"'.³⁸

Shaw captured the prevailing late-nineteenth-century English attitude to music when he wrote that 'art in England is regarded as a huge confectionery department, where sweets are made for the eye and ear just as they are made for the palate in the ordinary "tuck-shop"'.³⁹ This view, however, together with the opinions of the radio listeners in 1927, would certainly not have been endorsed by members of the College's new composers' club. Founded in the Christmas term of 1926 by Maconchy and Grace Williams, the club was comprised of a predominantly female group of composition students, including Dorothy Gow and Imogen Holst. These resourceful friends met once a week to debate the latest contemporary music and to discuss and criticize their own work – much to the pleasure of Vaughan Williams (or 'Uncle Ralph' as they called him) who thought he was witnessing a new 'golden age' of composers. Bartók's music particularly fired their imaginations. Imogen Holst recalled that they were all 'overjoyed when Bartók himself came to London to play his recent *Sonata for Pianoforte* and *Three Open Air Pieces* as well as the *Rumanian Folkdances from Hungary*'.⁴⁰ Indeed, club members eagerly rushed to acquire ringside seats in the Arts Theatre Club in London's West End for the live BBC radio broadcast given by Bartók on 4 March 1929. The earlier part of the concert – which included his two new Violin Rhapsodies – was broadcast, but the composer deliberately placed his Piano Sonata at the end of the programme (not broadcast by the BBC), fearing that it would simply be too difficult for radio listeners.

The impact of Bartók's music on Maconchy's musical development was significant. In the Christmas term of 1927, she submitted a work entitled *Bluebeard and Fatima* to the Patron's Fund for consideration. Although the

³⁸ Letters to the Editor, 'The Madness of Bartók and Other Matters', *Radio Times* (6 January 1928), p. 713.

³⁹ Shaw, *Music in London*, vol. ii, p. 147.

⁴⁰ Imogen Holst in 'Grace Williams: A Symposium (Part 1)', *Welsh Music* 5/6 (Summer 1977), p. 19.