

ELIZABETH LUTYENS

David C F Wright DMus

Agnes Elizabeth Lutyens became a rugged individual. She was a maverick. She was both articulate and argumentative. She was a radical and a Socialist and a snob. She liked to fight; she loved anything that smelled of excitement; she could not bear anything that was routine. She could be strange and eccentric but there is nothing wrong in being eccentric since that is better than conforming to majority opinion. She could be charming and exude a type of glamour one associates with a film star. She was very intelligent and this annoyed some people as they could not put anything across her.



Like the hateful Benjamin Britten, she liked to outrage and annoy people.

She was born in London on 9 July 1905, one of five children born to the celebrated architect, Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869- 1944). He was, and is known as the greatest British architect of all time. He designed a large area of New Delhi as well as many other successful projects. His wife, Lady Emily Lytton was a member of an eminently literary and political family but she was steeped in the evil Theosophy Movement and a disciple of Helen Blavatsky who formed the movement in 1875. The movement had among its leaders paedophiles such as C W Leadbetter and the Society believed in sexual liberty and encouraged paedophilia. Blavatsky was a medium and psychic and proved to be a fraud. She was a pagan and out to destroy Christianity and religions.

Other composers were disciples of this movement including Scriabin who suffered mental illness all his life and Cyril Scott whose beliefs and proclamations were also weird and dangerous.

There is no doubt that Elizabeth Lutyens's attitude and strange behaviour were the result of her mother's fascination with this evil movement and her mother's immersion in it. The overwhelming influence in Elizabeth's childhood and adolescence was her mother's attachment to this Society and an Indian boy whom the Society believed to be the reincarnation of God. This created a rift between Sir Edwin and his wife but, for Liz and her sister Mary, it meant spending time in the Tyrol, India and Australia with other adherents of this cult.

Betty, as she was sometimes called, reacted both against the cult and the Indian boy and admitted that Theosophy and her mother ruined her life. Her verdict was correct.

Her sister, Mary (1908-1999) was influenced by her mother to accept spiritualism and psychic teachings and wrote about the Indian boy Krishnamurti (1895-1986) who was claimed to be the Messiah and who overshadowed Jesus Christ. Mary was also influenced by Annie Besant (1847-1933) and the paedophile C W Leadbeater (his name is spelt differently at other sources) the then leaders of the Theosophy Society.

The Russian composer Scriabin was also a Theosophist. (See my article [Scriabin and mental illness](#)).

From the age of nine she wanted to be a composer as it was something that no other member of the family aspired to. If she had pursued art, her father would always be looking over her shoulder; if it were literature her mother would dominate her.

As a child, the only music she heard was of the Salvation Army in the street. When she was fourteen, she heard *Le Marseillaise* which made an impact on her.

She began to study music at the *Ecole Normale de Musique* in Paris believing France was the country of the future. The atmosphere of Paris in the 1920s excited her and she became absorbed in the music of Debussy.

She returned to London to study at RCM where she studied composition and the viola during 1926-1930. Her teachers included John Foulds and Harold Darke.

The great 'modern' composer at the time was Brahms and Betty set the whole of the book of Job in the style of Brahms. It was never performed.

She regarded Parry and Stanford as 'the heavy clouds upon us'. She hated what she called 'cow-pat' music, overblown music such as Mahler, Bruckner and Elgar. She was harshly criticised for her views and accused of liking Debussy which was 'not quite nice'.

'Modern' concerts took place at the Nursing Association Hall just off Cavendish Square where there were plaques on the wall Chastity and Endurance which may have been appropriate for music of that time with audiences seldom exceeding a dozen in number.

A fellow student was Iris Lemare who took up conducting. The violinist, Anne MacNaughton formed a string quartet and the women convened a meeting in a flat in Camden to discuss the problems of being female and musicians.

The MacNaughton-Lemare concerts came into being and quickly became an important force in London's musical life. They gave first performances of music by Elizabeth Maconchy, Grace Williams, Alan Rawsthorne and Benjamin Britten. Several of Lutyens's works were performed but she withdrew them because they were 'conservative and uniform in style'.

Another feature of these concerts was the performance of sixteenth and seventeenth century music which was quite unknown at the time and this was a crucial influence on Lutyens's maturity but she developed a dislike for predictability and cadences. Humphrey Searle used to say that some musicians complain about serial music as formulae and a method and yet early music was replete with formulae and method. Lutyens added and replete with predictability. She would say, "If I hear another cadence, I will scream!".

In 1939, she wrote her Concerto for nine instruments taking as a model of Webern's work. It was claimed to be the first serial work by a British composer but it was not since Lutyens used a fourteen note series which device she discovered for herself. She said, "In music, you clarify what you want by knowing what you don't want". She was not the first British serialist. Searle was.

In the 1930s, the BBC was a bastion against modern music and, indeed, remained so up to the time of William Glock in the 1960s. Glock like Clark was a musician having studied with Schnabel. The performance of modern music was due to the perspicacity of Humphrey Searle when he was at the BBC shortly after World War II. As a result 'modern' works were performed. For the first time we heard Webern and Dallapiccola, Lutyens and Leibowitz and many others including Fricker, Hamilton and ApIvor.

Lutyens developed her serialism and earned the nickname of Twelve-Note Lizzie which was inaccurate because her serialism was not always based on a twelve note row. She admitted in a BBC interview that she was never a real serialist. She added that she did sometimes produce a twelve-note theme and repeat it without the serialism of chords and accompaniments. For her, it was a means of writing

relatively fast and in an idiom devoid of boring predictable harmonies and it was useful to know what the next note was! She actually complained about true serialism and offended many composers in the process!

I was present when she had a row with some other British composers and was unreasonable. Eventually, she apologised and said, "if my mother had not destroyed me with spiritualism and psychic rubbish I would not be the cow I am today! My sister is mad with this nonsense as well!".

Lutyens's first success was a setting of Rimbaud's *O Seasons, O Chateau*, Op 13, which was originally turned down by the BBC as unsingable but Searle changed that. It was encored at its premiere.

In the 1930s and 1940s, Lutyens's artistic development was impeded by marriage and motherhood. In 1933 she married the singer Ian Herbert Campbell Glennie and they had three children, a boy and twin girls. In 1938 she left him for Edward Clark turning up on his doorstep at his flat in Fitzroy Street with her children. She had a son with Clark and then married her lover in 1942.

Clark was eighteen years older than Liz and had been a planner and producer with the BBC and one of the architects of the BBC Symphony Orchestra. He was an international figure. He had studied music with Schoenberg. He resigned from the BBC in 1936 and could not find another job. Nevertheless, he always gave the appearance of affluence (he always wore a carnation in his button hole) even though he had no money.

They were clearly in love and the children adored Edward. He was a man full of charm and confidence. There were endless parties and drinking when visitors came. Such visitors included Alan Rawsthorne who often wore a Stetson hat as if he were Roy Rogers. He was a terrible flirt when he was sober. Betty's daughter, Rose had a crush on Rawsthorne at one time. There was an occasion at a party when Rawsthorne 'disappeared' and was found drunk in the bath!

The flat was squalid. The bath was in the kitchen covered by a board when not in use. This was a far cry from Liz's opulent upbringing with servants. The marriage was always difficult; there were frequent rows, separations and reconciliations. Her life was particularly stressful when she was evacuated to Newcastle at the time of the Blitz.

On her return to London, she took Dylan Thomas in as a lodger and her children stayed with well-to-do members of the family or with foster parents. With Thomas and Rawsthorne, she developed a serious drinking problem. Her drunkenness upset her children and her public appearances were usually on the arm of some unknown man. She would dress in an expensive fur coat covering the most ordinary slacks or flares and smoking a cigarette in a holder.

All her life she was a tortured soul but when she died in London on 14th April 1983 she had left behind a legacy of interesting and intellectual music.

As to her music, it has not found as many friends as it should. Some have likened her music to novels by Jane Austen where nothing happens. Her music is predominantly slow, gentle and sparse. It often captures the glorious delicate sounds of Webern which Stravinsky called musical diamonds but this type of music in extended form such as in Lutyens's *And Suddenly it's Evening* Op 66 of 1965 for tenor and instruments at twenty four minutes can become tedious.

Like Elizabeth Maconchy, Lutyens wrote thirteen numbered string quartets, the last one being Opus 158 of 1982 and the first surviving quartet is number six, Op 25 of 1952. It is an organic work, intense and has an edgy atmosphere. It was written in twelve hours and as someone has said, "It is not flowery romantic nonsense!". It is clearly personal and introspective but the almost perpetual stillness will not appeal to everyone.

Her only so-called concerto is the Viola Concerto Op 15 of 1947 which deserves a revival.

The 13 minute String Trio Op 57 of 1964 is a work which shows occasional strength.

Quincunx for baritone, soprano and orchestra Op 44 of 1960 is magnificent piece of great atmosphere. It is score for baritone, soprano and orchestra. The unaccompanied baritone solo is simple but impressive. It is yet another slow piece but it has a gentle glow.

The Five Bagatelles for piano Op 49 of 1962 are a fine example of her style. The quicker Bagatelles are impressive.

Many of her vocal and choral works have unusual texts including those from the lands of the Eskimos and from the Far East. She used unusual instrumental forces. In her Triolet I, the instruments are clarinet, mandolin and cello. In the Triolet II, it is cello, marimba and harp. There are four numbered works called Plenum namely for piano Op 87, for oboe and piano Op 92, for string quartet Op 93, and for organ duet Op 100.

She did not care for the title Symphony but wrote four works entitled Music for Orchestra between 1955 and 1981.

Her autobiography is called In a Goldfish Bowl and that title was used for her ballad opera, Op 142.

She often considered her mortality with such works as Driving Out the Death and O Absalom. Absalom was the rebel son of King David of Israel. She also had a sense of humour as, for example, in her piece Time Off? Not a Ghost of a Chance!

She also wrote film music often for horror films.

She could be very difficult and unpleasant but, to her credit, she was her own person. Had she not been damaged as a youngster by her mother's delusional disorders and her sister Mary's involvement in the evil cult which filled Lady Emily's life, Liz would have not been so hurt and had had to fight to show that she was not mad 'as was Mary and mother' as she would often say.

© COPYRIGHT David C F Wright 1996 revised 2000. This article or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, quoted, reproduced, downloaded or altered in any way whatsoever nor stored in any retrieval system. Failure to comply is in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.