

## MARGARET KITCHIN

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There is no doubt that Margaret Kitchin was a sensational pianist and one of the greatest of our times but, like other pianists who specialize in 'modern' music, she was not fully appreciated. I have heard musicians, including concert pianists, somewhat depreciate both her and the music she played but later admitted that it was the music they hated and the reason for this hatred was partly due to the fact that they could not play this challenging music themselves. There are others with this hostile and biased view such as a man who is an expert on Elgar and another who writes sleeve notes for CDs and may and does give the impression that he is an expert on British music.

There are many fine pianists today who play this modern and very difficult music as well as standard repertoire such as Ian Pace, Geoffrey Douglas Madge, Stephanie McCallum, Nicholas Hodges and Jonathan Powell to name a few. They are all remarkable pianists.

Margaret was a highly educated woman who was not trammelled by tradition and the unwritten rules as to what is expected of a concert pianist and what they should play. She studied all her music in great depth and, therefore, her observations about music were always based on fact and not emotion or traditional practices.

She would dismiss any inane comment about composers and their music particularly such inane comments as "Even if it not good music, I know what I like and that is all that matters." It is somewhat surprising that many people make this remark and adopt the attitude that if it is music or a composer they like then, it is great music and a great composer.

She did not like superficial music, cheap music or salon music. Consequently, she did not like Chopin and Schumann was not a favourite either. This recalls Alfred Brendel's comment that great pianists play great music; the rest play Chopin. She was occasionally bored with predictable music and this is why she became a specialist in modern music. Music had to have depth and an original voice. Modern music interested her because few people played it and the fact is that many concert pianists of high renown could not play it, because it was so difficult being technically demanding and beyond them.

She was a very courageous woman and one will never forget her giving the British premiere in London of Roger Sessions Piano Concerto in 1956 when she was booed and hissed. Other concert pianists were scathing of the music and of Kitchin had dared to play it. The fact is that these critical pianists could not play it as Sessions' music calls for the pianist to perform Herculean tasks. If I were at a concert and booed the Elgar Cello Concerto there would be a hue and cry and, perhaps, a riot, but it was permissible to boo the Sessions.

She was born on 23 March 1914 at Montreux, Switzerland. Her father Othmar Rothen was Swiss and her mother, Kate Piercey was English. She studied at both the Conservatoires in Montreux and Lausanne where one of her teachers was Jacqueline Blanchard. In 1935 she married Michael Kitchin who worked for the British Council and was something of a musician and composed some music. They were to have two daughters.



They spent the war in Switzerland and, in 1946, Margaret received the Prix d'Excellence at Lausanne. With her family, she came to London in 1949 and studied at RAM achieving her LRAM. But there were few opportunities afforded to her for concert work, and she concentrated on contemporary work and was associated with the Society for the Promotion of New Music (SPNM). Here she met that fascinating group of British composers such as Humphrey Searle, Peter Racine Fricker, Iain Hamilton and Alexander Goehr. She also identified with the music of Berg, Schoenberg and Webern as well as Boulez and Dallapiccola. She would also have met at SPNM the Czech émigré Liza Fuchosva, who was a year older, who also played several new and demanding works.

Margaret explained that these modern composers did not live in the past and, therefore, their music was not anachronistic. There were plenty of people playing the standards and such repertoire was well and adequately represented.

In 1949, at Morley College, which was committed to new music, she played Hindemith's Concert Music for piano, brass and harps under Walter Goehr. In November 1950 she premiered Priaux Rainier's Barbaric Suite of 1949 and it was Rainier who introduced her to Michael Tippett who, later, introduced her to her second husband, Howard Hartog whom she married in 1951.

Iain Hamilton dedicated his Piano Concerto no. 1 of 1949 to Margaret.

Kitchin often partnered the splendid violinist Maria Lidka playing Fricker's Violin Sonata no. 1 at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in 1950 and they premiered Eva Ruth Spaldng's Violin Sonata no. 3 in 1952 and, at Morley College, in 1953, Don Banks' Violin Sonata.

During 1951-2, Alexander Goehr worked on his Piano Sonata, Op 2, which he dedicated to Kitchin.

At this college in 1952, she played Hamilton's Piano Sonata Op 13 completed in 1951 but revised in 1971. In 1954, at the North London Polytechnic, she revived the massive Piano Concerto by Alan Bush (1934-7) which also calls for a baritone and male chorus and this was repeated on demand in Paris. She concentrated on the piano music of Fricker and was one of the three soloists in his Concertante for three pianos, strings and timpani of 1951 at a Promenade Concert in August 1956 with the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra.

Tippett wrote four piano sonatas. The first was called the Fantasy Sonata and occupied 1936-7 but was revised twice in 1942 and 1952 respectively. His Second Sonata of 1962 was dedicated to Kitchin, the third appeared in 1973 and the fourth in 1984. Margaret played them all. She found Tippett to be exasperating because he never stopped talking and, as many of us discovered, it was often difficult to understand what he was talking about.

There are many people including those who are not musicians who resort to writing about music and often do not know what they are talking about and are scathing about serial music and the avant garde. Some are so ignorant that they say that all atonal music is serial. For many years, Lewis Foreman has been unkind about Sir William Glock, who was Controller of Music at the BBC from 1959 to 1971. Mr Foreman and his disciples insist that Glock blocked the music of modern tonal composers in favour of both the avant garde and experimental music, and further complains about the Glock-Boulez years whereas Boulez only worked with Glock for a few months. This hostility towards the challenging modern music is born of prejudice and ignorance. Glock did not like avant garde music but had to broadcast some, which was very little, in accordance with the BBC's Charter. It is still said that Glock blacklisted some composers and may have ruined their reputations which is so untrue. My late friend Richard Noble kept all Radio Times since 1951 and analysed all the music broadcast in the Glock years and he did not broadcast much avant garde music and concentrated on tonal British composers including many of which. I have not heard. Why do people invent untruths? What do they hope to achieve?

(See my two articles about Glock on this site: [Sir William Glock](#), [Sir William Glock - not avant garde](#))

When there was a new contemporary work to be broadcast, which was very seldom, the BBC usually asked Margaret Kitchin to premiere it.

Margaret formed an association with the horn player Barry Tuckwell and they performed Hamilton's Sonata Notturna and Searle's compelling setting of Baudelaire's Les fleurs de mal in which the tenor was the magnificent Gerald English. Margaret also played Searle's Suite Op 29 for piano.

Her repertoire was amazing. She performed the stunning Schoenberg Concerto in London and in Boston and performed works of excruciating difficulty by Anthony Gilbert, Henze, Elliott Carter, Thea Musgrave, Elizabeth Lutyens, Richard Rodney Bennett's Studies, Gerard Schurmann and, rarely, Benjamin Britten, but she added, "I don't know why!".

Lewis Foreman writes that Margaret was not impressed with the music of William Wordsworth which is not so. She admired the Ballade Op 47 which Curzon recorded and, understandably, she spoke highly of his earliest symphonies and string quartets.

She had a regard for the compositions of the distinguished pianist Artur Schnabel who wrote a piano concerto and a big piano sonata, among other things, including three symphonies.

The impresario Howard Hartog was the owner/director of Ingpen & Williams, an agency for artists, and he was a champion of modern music and his offices were below their Kensington flat. What these two did for contemporary music and the careers of young players cannot be quantified. In 1977 Margaret gave up playing and worked at the business until her husband died of cancer in 1990.

Latterly, she was confined to her flat. When I last saw her she said that she would give me an interview but she had just given an interview to "a complete idiot who thinks he knows everything about music who had published an article about her reporting things that I did not say."

She was keen on tennis and supported British players in many ways which again showed the fundamental goodness of her character

A truly great pianist, she died on 16 June 2008, aged 94.

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