

ELIZABETH MACONCHY

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The word integrity is probably the best word to describe Elizabeth Maconchy.

She was born in Broxbourne, Hertfordshire on 19 March 1907 of Irish parents. Although her parents were not musical, she began to compose at the age of six, and such works were little piano pieces. She had a happy childhood in the country. Her father, Gerald, was a solicitor and her mother was born Violet Poe. In 1917, the family moved to Ireland. She had piano and harmony lessons and, after a time, her teacher advised her to study at RCM in London. The decision to uproot and go to London was sadly made possible by the death of her father in 1922. The following year, she began her studies with Arthur Alexander for the piano and Charles Wood for composition. Later, she studied with Vaughan Williams. She was 16, shy, unprepared and had only heard an orchestra once in Beethoven's Symphony no 7, and had never heard a string quartet.



Vaughan Williams was not a good teacher but 'a wonderful man and a tremendous influence.' He told Maconchy that he had learned the hard way and that, perhaps, that was the best way. He was a great encouragement and told Maconchy that brilliance for its own sake was not allowed and that one must have an adequate technique and express one's ideas in the clearest way.

Although this was sound advice it may have been somewhat counterproductive since some critics believe Maconchy's music lacks colour. Others have said that this was due to the basic gentleness of her character and, as many women composers of the time found, it was considered a little vulgar for women to compose exciting or quasi-masculine scores. However, although shy, she was a very strong character. Some critics attacked her for writing assertive masculine music. Others praised her for the colour in her music.

After being a pupil of Vaughan Williams for about a year, Elizabeth Maconchy discovered the music of Bartok which was a revelation to her and remained so for the rest of her life. Here was a composer untrammelled by convention and tradition and with a rugged freshness and originality quite at variance with the plodding pomposity of Edwardian music. Like Elizabeth Lutyens, and many others, she found the longeurs of Elgar and Parry tedious.

She won several prizes at College including the Mendelssohn Scholarship which, many years later, her daughter, Nicola LeFanu also won.

After leaving RCM, Vaughan Williams recommended that Maconchy study in Prague rather than in Vienna. In 1929 and 1930, she studied for a few months with Karel Jirak. She did visit Vienna and there are stories of her smoking cigars with fellow student, Grace Williams, in the city's street and cafes. In 1930, Jirak conducted the premiere of her Piano Concerto with the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra. This work is known as the Concertino for piano and small orchestra. The soloist was Erwin Schulhoff. In the same year, Henry Wood gave the first performance of her Suite The Land which was a great success for the newly-wed Mrs William LeFanu. She had sent a score to Wood 'out of the blue' and delighted that he took it up.

William LeFanu came from a very famous Irish family. He was born in Bray, County Wicklow in 1904 and was a descendant from a Huguenot family. He was an authority on Irish literature (among many other things) and, from 1929 to 1968, was the librarian of the Royal College of Surgeons in London. He married Elizabeth in 1930 and died in Norwich in 1995.

That there was prejudice in England, and elsewhere, against women composers is true but Maconchy told me that she had no real difficulty at RCM but, rather, with music publishers. They believed that girl composers could only write little piano pieces and songs. To some extent this may have been right particularly when you consider such composers as Cheminade.

In 1932, Maconchy developed tuberculosis, the disease that killed her father. It was recommended that she go to Switzerland but she said that if she were going to die she would wish to do so either in Ireland or England. She went to the south-east coast of England and completely 'disappeared for a while' from the musical world. She exercised self-will and became an individual and strong woman.

Some of her music was performed by the MacNaughton-Lemare concerts and, in 1933, her Oboe Quintet won the Daily Telegraph chamber music prize. It was also the year of her String Quartet no. 1, the medium to which she felt the most affinity. She once told me that she liked impassioned arguments in music and hoped that this was apparent in her string quartets. She was at her most comfortable writing for string instruments and enjoyed contrapuntal devices. Her method of composition was straight forward. She would begin with a simple idea, perhaps a mere fragment, and work outwards. She explained that the plan is conscious and then the unconscious takes over. "When the work is complete, it is difficult to say how much has been conscious and how much has been unconscious", she would say.

Politically, she was left wing. She supported the Republican cause in the Spanish Civil War and helped her Jewish friends escape from Warsaw because of the rise of Nazism.

She usually composed at the piano and admits that she scrapped a great deal. She said, "Composing is a selfish and solitary occupation and there is no money in it". She was financially supported by her husband to whom she was happily married for over 60 years.

Her first daughter, Anna, was born in 1939. Fortunately, Betty was very domesticated and often spoke of having to compose between feeds, nappy changes and bottling home-made jam.

During the Second World War, she composed her String Quartet no. 4 which was highly acclaimed and rightly so. It is a strong, dark, uneasy work and has a very personal character. Her String Quartet no 5 was the first to attract a wide audience and probably the first work of hers to be recorded. It was written in Ireland in 1948, the year after the birth of her daughter Nicola Frances LeFanu on 28 April 1947, It is curiously reminiscent of the superlative string quartets of the Dutch composer Willem Pijper who died in 1947.

The Fifth Quartet is an incredibly mature and concise work and, as with many of her works, a marvellous pattern for both students and fellow composers to study. While the piece must not be underrated, its greatest appeal is essentially to fellow musicians. It is a faultless score. It should have made her reputation but, sadly, prejudice still existed against the female sex and against her intellectualism. The works should be judged on its merit and not on the gender of the composer. But sexism and prejudice does prevail. I remember being one of many adjudicators at a cello competition where the best performer was a very large girl with a slightly disfigured face who played magnificently and I voted for her but the winner was a pretty young thing because she had lovely legs!

Shortly after the war, Maconchy produced Concertinos for clarinet and bassoon respectively a concerto for oboe and bassoon and her important Symphony for double string orchestra (1945 -8).

There was also a Viola Concerto and the Symphony for full orchestra premiered by Boult which seems not to have seen the light of day since. I believe Maconchy withdrew these last two mentioned works. There was a Sinfonietta of 1976 and a Little Symphony of 1980. Her Music for Strings was premiered at the BBC Proms in 1983, a work that is different in structure from all her previous works but, as usual, it is entirely practicable. As already implied, her writing for strings is exemplary. Some claim it is like Tippett and vastly superior to Elgar.

Elizabeth Maconchy enjoyed the intimacy of rehearsing with people for whom she wrote music. She had a love of poetry but this was not with a consideration to put it to music. She would say that some poetry is so complete in itself that it should not be set to music. She also said that the poetry of Gerald Manly Hopkins does not suggest music although she did set some of his texts. She has been said to have said that music should be passionately intellectual and intellectually passionate. Just intellectual would make the music dry; whereas, for example, passion without a mind behind it is no good at all.

W H Auden, in his inaugural address as professor of poetry at Oxford, said, "When I write I feel that I am embarking on a perilous voyage in an unknown sea. I never write from experience". Edmund Rubbra said the same thing and it is true of Elizabeth Maconchy.

In the 1950s and 1960s, she turned to opera, writing three short one-act operas namely *The Sofa* (1957), *The Departure* (1961) and *The Three Strangers* (1967). They have had several productions and were recorded on Chandos.

Possibly the finest of her choral works are the settings of Dylan Thomas's *And Death Shall Have No Dominion* (1969) and Louis MacNiece's *Prayer Before Birth* (1971). No words can be a substitute for hearing these masterpieces. *Prayer Before Birth* has all the qualities of greatness.

Among her vocal works is a beautiful setting of J M Synge's *My Dark Night* for soprano and instruments.

And the string quartets continued. The String Quartet no 9 (1969) has a slow movement protesting at the Soviet occupation of Prague, a city she had visited some forty years earlier. Yet it has to be said that her music is not sentimental or trivial; what is heartfelt in her music does not belong to Hollywood slush, nor, thankfully, the wallowing of Elgar but, rather, are direct statements of music, matter of fact and profound.

The String Quartet no. 10 (1971) is in one movement of coherence and rhythmic vitality. Its successor, the String Quartet no. 11 was commissioned by the City Music Society to celebrate the 650th anniversary of the granting of its charter to the Worshipful Company of Goldsmiths. It was first performed by the Lindsay Quartet in the Goldsmiths Hall in London. I feel that there is some hesitancy in this piece where continuity seems to break down and perhaps this music is somewhat derivative.

For some time in the early 1960s she was the Chairman of the Composers Guild and elected President of SPNM (Society for the Promotion of New Music) on the death of Britten in 1976. She represented the Composer Guild in Russia in 1960 and in Canada in 1961.

A leading British composer once told me that Maconchy's attitude to music was shown in her legacy of thirteen string quartets upon which she will be judged. In this realm she set a very high standard and there seems to be no foreseeable challenge to this achievement. Perhaps she summed up her life of music when she said, "Being a composer is a wonderful life sentence from which there is no escape".

She was made a CBE in 1977 and a Dame in 1987 and died on 11 November 1994 in Norwich.

Her daughter Nicola, whom I remember as a teenager and young woman, and who is a composer in her own right, composed her String Quartet no 2 in memory of her parents. Nicola is married to the Australian composer David Lumsdaine (See my review of his CD White Dawn)

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