

## GRACE WILLIAMS

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Two weeks before Grace Williams died in 1977, she wrote a letter to her lifelong friend and fellow composer Elizabeth Maconchy. Although fatally ill with cancer, there was no bitterness in her words, only gratitude that she had had the "great good fortune to be able to respond to so many wonderful things".

Grace Mary Williams, who was to become one of the most important and influential 20th century Welsh composers, was born at the stroke of midnight on February 19/20, 1906 in the coastal town of Barry. The eldest of three children, Grace was encouraged from an early age to pursue her interest in music. Both parents were school teachers who loved music. Her father, William, was a highly regarded amateur choral director who did not believe in teaching music to his children in the traditional manner of exercise book and graded exams. Instead he simply opened his extensive library of music scores to them, an act which enabled them to explore and discover on their own and which ultimately led Grace Williams to find her own highly individual music style.

Grace often played the piano for her father's choir rehearsals, and at home she played the violin in a trio with her brother Glyn, a cellist, and her father, a pianist. She also broadened her knowledge of orchestral music through recordings, which her father collected avidly.

As a school girl, she excelled in mathematics, music and English and developed an abiding interest in French literature which she enjoyed throughout her life. She began to show ability in composing music, and, encouraged by her teacher, Miss Rhyda Jones, a former pupil of Walford Davies, Grace often sat on the beach at Cold Knap in Barry composing songs and dances. The sea would always be a powerful influence and inspiration in Grace Williams' life as a composer.

In 1923, she entered University College, Cardiff on a scholarship, and while she found the social life at the school exciting, the music programme was "deadly" for a would-be composer like Williams who found her enthusiasm stifled by academic exercises. After graduation in 1926, she moved to London to attend the Royal College of Music where one of her most important and influential teachers was composer Ralph Vaughan Williams, whom she called 'Uncle Ralph'.

At the RCM, Grace joined several other gifted young women composers including Elizabeth Maconchy (1907-1994), Dorothy Gow (1893-1982), and Imogen Holst (1907-1984), the daughter of composer Gustav Holst. Encouraged by Vaughan Williams, the women met frequently to hear and criticize each other's work.

In 1930, Grace Williams won the prestigious RCM Octavia Travelling Scholarship which enabled her to complete her training in Vienna with Egon Wellesz (1885-1974). With Wellesz she was indoctrinated to hate the music of the Second Viennese School and ridiculed the music of these masters. Here she also had the opportunity to indulge herself in the music of Wagner, Richard Strauss and Mahler and the late Austro-German Romantic tradition.

It is amazing to note that Wellesz hated the music of Sibelius.

Although Grace did not initially care for Mahler's music, it would later influence on her own compositions.

Her first work of distinction is probably her Two Psalms for contralto, harp and strings of 1932 which had proved successful..

She was a lifelong friend of Elisabeth MacConchy and tells of the times in Prague when they sat together in public places smoking cigars or cheroots. At one time she was friendly with Benjamin Britten but her opinion changed when she discovered his pederasty.

After her return to London in 1931, the 25-year-old composer was music master at Camden School for Girls and

visiting lecturer at Southlands College of Education. *Hen Walia*, an orchestral work based on folk tunes with the lullaby *Huna blentyn* as a centrepiece, was composed during this time and became her first work to receive frequent performances. In 1936, she composed an *Elegy* for string orchestra which contained hints of the highly individual music that she would compose years later.

Prior to World War II, she composed her most ambitious orchestral work, *Four Illustrations for the Legend of Rhiannon* based on the *Mabinogion*, and in 1941 her brilliant *Fantasia on Welsh Nursery Tunes* (*Jim Cro; Beryn y Bwn; Migildi, Magildi; Si lwli 'mabi; Gee, geffyl bach; Csga di fy mhlentyn tlws; Yr eneth ffein ddu; Cadi ha!*) was broadcast by the BBC. It was so well received by the war-weary public in performances throughout Wales that it was recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra. The *Fantasia* remains Grace Williams' most popular work.

During the war, she was evacuated to Lincolnshire and Grantham in particular where she produced performances of *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Bartered Bride*.

She composed her *Sinfonia Concertante* (1941), *Symphonic Impressions* and *Sea Sketches* (eventually published by OUP in 1951), the latter work is a highly evocative five-movement work for string orchestra. By the time the war ended, the deprivation and difficulties Williams experienced trying to earn money while spending her free time composing had taken a toll on her. She was in poor physical health and hinted to friends that she might give up composition altogether. In 1947, doctors concerned about a persistent illness suggested that she return to Barry where she could be properly cared for by her parents having a self-contained flat in their house.

The move provided the change that Grace Williams needed, and she never returned to live in London. By the late 40s, Wales was blossoming as a centre for the arts. The BBC had set up a Welsh Broadcasting Region while the Welsh National Opera, the Welsh Office of the Arts Council and a number of music festivals had been established. She began writing incidental music for radio plays and wrote scripts for BBC school broadcasts which included her own arrangements of folk songs from all over the world. In 1948, she became one of the first -- if not the first -- women to write music for film with her score for *Blue Scar*.

In 1955, Grace Williams was 49 years old. While the music she composed up to that time in her life was good, it was not original enough to lift her out of the category of "minor composer." Her compositions with few exceptions were rooted in romanticism, relied heavily on traditional Welsh melodies and images of land and sea, or had been inspired by an event in Welsh history.

She scrapped her *Symphony no. 1* but retained the scherzo. She considered revising her *Violin Concerto*.

By the age of 50, Grace Williams had found her own musical voice, one now influenced by the rhythms and cadences of old Welsh poetry and oratory, and penillion and ballad singing. With her music in greater demand, she now began receiving commissions. She was able to put aside much of the necessary busy work that had provided her with an income and devote more time to composition.

It is hard to believe that in the early 1950s she thought of giving up music. The stress of teaching and composing was making her ill as well as her devoted care for her parents.. She had formed a relationship with a Polish man during the war but she gave him up and not her music. She never married.

In 1961 she composed her opera *The Parlour* based on a story by Guy de Maupassant about a tyrannical grandmother. This was produced with great effect by the Welsh National Opera in 1966. She always spoke of writing another opera.

She was painfully self-critical. I remember at a rehearsal of her music with the BBC Welsh Symphony Orchestra that Bryden "Jack" Thomson was playing some of her music. He stopped and Grace gave her approval. Then Jack ran through the same passage again and Grace tugged at her jacket, "That's not right," she complained., "But Grace," he replied, "That is how you wanted it played."

She had a love for the sea, the theatre and the trumpet. In fact, she was sometimes referred to as *Grace the Trumpet*

and was gladdened by any good response to her music.

"You know," she wrote to a friend, "it was a marvellous sensation being asked to write something; someone wanting your music. Once I got going on it, the music absolutely haunted me... Such was the elation of having a commission, the ideas flowed freely."

In the last 20 years of her life, Grace Williams composed music that marks her as a composer of importance in Wales. Her influence on younger Welsh composers was enormous, and she proved that it is possible to live in a small country and survive as an artist. In a land with a deeply rooted choral tradition, she helped place orchestral music on a new footing, and she brought to the concert hall a distinctly Welsh musical language in works like her *Penillion*, *Ballads for Orchestra*, *Carillons* ( 1955), *Symphony No. 2* ( 1957), the *Trumpet Concerto* (1963 and *Castell Caernarfon*.( 1969) Grace Williams did not neglect the vocal music that is the lifeblood of the Welsh people and left some 90 settings for voice, many with orchestra. Her *Choral Suite: The Dancers* was one of her first successful vocal works and received its premier by Joan Sutherland singing solo with the Penarth Ladies Choir in 1954! Williams had an affinity for vocal writing and over the years produced large scale choral works like the haunting *Ave maris stella* and her choral masterpiece *Missa Cambrensis* written for the Llandaff Festival in 1971. In her song settings with orchestra, she selected a broad range of poets from ancient and Medieval Welsh texts to Gerard Manley Hopkins, Siegfried Sassoon, D.H. Lawrence and the American poet May Sarton. Welsh poetry is to be found in her *Four Medieval Welsh Poems* for contralto, harp and harpsichord of 1962 and *Two Ninth-Century Welsh Poems* for baritone and harp of 1965 her last completed work was two *Choruses* of 1975 for chorus, harp and two horns evoking the sea and are settings of Rudyard Kiplings's harp *Song of the Dane Women*, Thomas Beddoes and *Mariner's Song*.

She had strong opinions on composers and said that the finest Welsh composer was David Wynne (1900-1983) whereas one might have thought she would refer to William Mathias or Alun Hoddinott.

Her writing for the voice is exemplary and I have no doubt that her work for soprano and orchestra *Fairest of Stars* of 1973 is a masterpiece. It was written for the wonderful, Janet Price, who has told me that Grace understood the voice and Janet's voice to perfection. The work is sublime and haunting as in, for example, the closing part of Brahms's *Alto Rhapsody*. The final passage of the Williams' work *Hail universal Lord* has an unsurpassed atmosphere and quality. See my article on Adrian Beaumont.

For her contributions to music, she was offered the OBE in 1966, but she turned it down. A good performance of her music meant more to her than a decoration.

On her 70th birthday in 1976, she received tributes from admirers throughout the world, and the Welsh BBC broadcast a program of her music. Her major orchestra works have been recorded.

Three months later, she experienced the first signs of what would prove to be a fatal cancer. Surgery and radiation therapy did not improve her condition and left her debilitated.

On January 25, 1977, she wrote a farewell letter to Elizabeth Maconchy to tell her "...all along I've known this could happen and now it has I'm quite calm and prepared and can only count my blessings — that I've had such a run of good health, able to go on writing – and just being me with my thoughts and ideas and sensitivity. From now on it won't be so good but even so there are sunsets and the sea and the understanding of friends."

Grace Williams died on February 10, just nine days before her seventy-first birthday.