

Elizabeth Maconchy DBE (1907-1994): some biographical and musical notes by her daughter Nicola LeFanu written for the two issues of the Journal of The British Music Society.

## Part 1: 1907-1945

Elizabeth Maconchy (EM) was born in 1907, the middle child of the three daughters of Violet, née Poë, and Gerald Maconchy, a solicitor. Though she was born in England, family life was based on Ireland. The children had the run of the Santry demesne in Co. Dublin: their grandparents lived at Santry Court, since Captain Poë was agent for the Domville estate. In 1917 the Maconchy family moved to Howth and EM was able to have music lessons in Dublin. She had been found at the piano, picking out tunes, when she was six; from then on her focus on music never wavered, the centre of an otherwise unremarkable and happy childhood.

In 1922 her father died; he had contracted tuberculosis during his service in the Great War. Soon, Mrs Maconchy decided to move back to England so as to follow the advice of EM's Dublin teachers, who had recognised an outstanding talent and said 'she must go to the Royal College of Music'.

EM entered the RCM in 1923, studying piano with Arthur Alexander and composition with Charles Wood; in a couple of years, she became a pupil of Vaughan Williams, saying later that 'it was like turning on a light'. Her progress at RCM was meteoric. She arrived as a shy Irish girl of 16 who knew only the music she could play for herself (no wireless, no gramophone and very few professional musicians resident in Dublin). By 1925 she was greeted by the doorman as 'the great Maconchy'; in 1927, moving on from songs and suites, she composed her first violin sonata and began her Piano Concertino. These striking works were already in a musical language far removed from mainstream English music, and indicate her growing familiarity with European new music, which she was discovering for herself: Debussy, Ravel and Stravinsky, but especially Bartok. Patron's Fund orchestral performances confirmed her distinctive voice; in 1929 she left the RCM with glowing reports (RVW: 'I can teach her no more; she will go far') and an Octavia travelling scholarship, which enabled several months study in Prague. The story of her being denied the Mendelssohn Scholarship is well known: the committee were in favour of Maconchy but the Chair (Sir Hugh Allen) cast his vote against her, telling her 'you will only get married and never write another note'.

EM's formative years as a music student were enhanced by the lifelong friends she made, especially Anne Macnaghten and Grace Williams. With the latter, she corresponded for over fifty years; their correspondence will be published in 2008 (University of Illinois Press, edited by Sophie Fuller and Jenny Doctor). In Prague, too, she made lifelong Czech friends; when she arrived there, she was very homesick, but at the end of her first week she heard Jenufa 'and that transformed things'. Janacek's music was, like Bartok's, an important influence on her.

Public acclaim came in 1930. On March 19th, her 23rd birthday, the Piano Concertino was played in Prague; Jirak conducted the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra with Erwin Schulhoff as the soloist. Then on 30th August, Henry Wood gave the premiere of her orchestral suite 'The Land' at the Proms. 'The Land', named after the poem by Vita Sackville West, is a four movement work, vivid, assured and individual. It received wonderful notices in the Press: Hughes in the Daily Telegraph wrote that 'the young composer, equipped with a superb technique, has created a work of art that is in every

way distinguished and masterly.. music of a first rate intelligence, sensitive and subtle yet capable of creating things on big lines'; the Daily Mail referred to 'boldness and directness.. EM has no timidity, she covers great fresco-like surfaces with confidence and strength.. sustained brilliance'; The Times noted 'a very favourable impression was created.. the greatest degree of imagination was discernible in the orchestration'; and both the Manchester Guardian and the journal 'The Lady' stressed her originality: 'she is destined to occupy a very high place among native composers'. No less significant was the praise EM received from Henry Wood, Gustav Holst, RVW and Donald Tovey, who went on to programme and play her works in Edinburgh. Although publication did not immediately come her way (Boosey and Hawkes said 'they would not consider publishing orchestral music by a young lady, perhaps a few songs'..) further performances did, and her career was watched with great interest.

Only a week before the Prom premiere, she married William LeFanu, (WRL) an historian and scholar, from a well known Irish literary family. Although their families were in Ireland, they settled in London. Only a year or so later, however, it became apparent that EM, like her father, had TB. She refused to go and live in Switzerland as the doctors said she must; she had just married and begun a brilliant musical career in London and, she said later, it never occurred to her that she was thought to be dying. She and her husband moved to the country - first Brighton, then Kent - and she lived entirely out of doors; they slept in an open-sided hut, and as her strength returned, she composed outside. When she was too ill to copy her music, friends rallied round to do so - the young Benjamin Britten among them.

Gradually she began to re-establish herself: choral, orchestral and chamber works all received their premieres in these pre-war years and she knew, and wrote for, many of the leading performers of the time. Sophie Wyss, Kathleen Long, Harriet Cohen, Andre Mangeot, Bernard Shore all gave premieres of her work. Often her first performances were at the newly founded Macnaghten Lemare concerts; this era is evoked superbly in Margaret Williams film about EM, made in 1985 for Channel 4. EM's ballet 'Great Agrippa' (1933) was first heard at the Macnaghten Lemare concerts, as was her first String Quartet (1932/3); almost all her works were broadcast by the BBC, and her 1932 oboe quartet was recorded for HMV, by Helen Gaskell and the Griller quartet. As well as performances in London, Dublin and Prague, she was programmed regularly at ISCM festivals, bringing her music to the attention of a wider European audience. This led, for example, to a concert in Warsaw in 1937 devoted entirely to her music; but the deteriorating situation in Europe meant that further East European and Austrian performances planned for 1938/9 could not happen. During the nineteen thirties, EM became politically active as far as her health permitted, raising funds for the Republican cause when the Spanish civil war began and running a section of the Left Book club. She was also involved in helping her Jewish friends in Prague to escape.

It is instructive to compare the *gravitas* of the String Quartet no 2 (1936) with the exuberance of no 1 from four years earlier. This second quartet is searching and serious, contemplative as well as assertive; the texture is largely contrapuntal, its four voices weaving a counterpoint of rhythms as well as melodic lines. It embodies qualities which she later described in a broadcast about the nature of string quartets: 'an impassioned argument, an intense but disciplined expression of emotion'. Meanwhile, alongside her concert works - for example the beautiful song cycle 'The Garland' (1937), the ballet 'Little Red Shoes' (1935), the 3rd string quartet (1938) and a number of other chamber works and songs - she wrote some 'political' pieces: choruses or unison songs, published by the Workers Music Association.

In 1939, with the threat of German invasion, EM went back to Dublin for the birth of her first child, Elizabeth Anna; but the next year she rejoined WRL in Kent. Then in 1941 they

were evacuated; WRL was Librarian for the Royal College of Surgeons, and they went, with the library, to Shropshire. Inevitably, the war years were difficult for them: they were isolated from friends and musicians and from their families in Ireland. Moreover EM's younger sister had also succumbed to TB, and was living in Switzerland; her mother was with her, and both died during the war. Some of the sisters' correspondence survives, and gives a detailed picture of wartime life: EM strove to make time every day for composing, while also growing a vegetable garden and cooking and preserving to eke out rations. The letters also give numerous glimpses of EM the composer; asked to contribute to a composite orchestral work in honour of VW's seventieth birthday, she wrote: 'Arthur Bliss has asked me to write something..there are five others being asked - Constant Lambert, Rubbra, Gerald Finzi, Robin Milford and Patrick Hadley.. it will be a frightfully funny concert, won't it?'

Her ballet 'Puck Fair' (1939/40) was performed in Ireland in her absence, first in a two piano version, then orchestrated by her friend Ina Boyle. With choreography by Cepta Cullen and designs by Mainie Jellett, it was an important landmark in the establishment of a national ballet in Ireland, as Victoria O'Brien has demonstrated. EM made a concert Suite from the ballet, which Boult played at a 1944 Prom; and later she revised the ballet orchestration. She continued to be regularly performed and also to be broadcast, despite the lack of an overtly patriotic aspect in her music. It was during the war that she wrote a number of serial works, giving herself what she called 'a course in twelve note method'. However, she withdrew these pieces and did not embrace serialism; her language was concise and economic and she already derived all her harmonic and melodic material from an initial *donnée*; further constraint would not benefit her.

With the end of the war, EM and WRL left Shropshire; their cottage in Kent had been bombed and virtually nothing could be salvaged, so they moved to Essex. There they could be in reach of London, while living in a climate that would prevent a recurrence of TB. Living first at Wickham Bishops (where the undersigned, their second child Nicola Frances, was born in 1947) and then at Boreham, EM remained in Essex until the year of her death. Her musical life was based on London, as was WRL's working life; but they continued to spend their holidays in Ireland as far as possible, homesick for their childhood places. In Boreham, they established a beautiful garden, and their house Shottesbrook now bears a blue plaque commemorating the forty years EM lived there.

The main influence on the musical style of EM's works up till 1945 is East European modernism. She was never part of the English pastoral school. Holst was the only English composer whose influence can be heard in her early work; although RVW was a lifelong and much loved friend, there is not a strong stylistic influence. When in her letters to her sister or Grace Williams she refers to her excitement over hearing broadcasts of *Wozzeck* or *Sacre* or, later, of '*Les Illuminations*', it is clear that her tastes were also well removed from those of her erstwhile teacher. This did not prevent her continuing to seek his advice throughout her early years, when she would travel to Dorking to play him her latest piece. Likewise, she and Grace Williams frequently sought each other's advice, scrawling bits of ms into their letters.

Much of EM's work from the period 1927-1945 is still available in one form or another, although she withdrew quite a lot of her pre-war works. The archive of her manuscripts, together with printed matter and other materials, is held at St Hilda's College, Oxford; she was an honorary Fellow of the College. ([www.sthildas.ox.ac.uk/information/](http://www.sthildas.ox.ac.uk/information/)). Many of her early works were published by Lengnick; the Lengnick hire library is managed by Music Sales, and Lengnick study scores, including the first seven string quartets, should be available on sale through Faber. (Lengnick is now owned by BMG.) Early works were also published by Hinrichsen and OUP and are long out of print, with the exception of 'Ophelia's song' of which OUP still sells hundreds. No publisher has taken up her many

early songs, though 'The Garland' ((1937) is published by Chester Music, who publish all her mature work. This year, Gonzaga Music are publishing her two violin sonatas, (1927 and 1943) which will make a fine addition to the violin repertoire.

As far as recording is concerned, all 13 of the string quartets continue to be available: the original Unicorn Kanchana CDs were re-issued in 2005 (Regis FRC9301). Individual artists have recorded isolated songs and chamber works, but otherwise early works are poorly represented in the catalogue. Lorelt plan to remedy this: Odaline de la Martinez is recording a comprehensive CD of EM's unaccompanied choral music and plans a CD of orchestral works. The absence of the Piano Concertino (1928) and The Land (1930) from the discography only serves to point up their absence from the canonic repertoire; which is commented on with ever greater frequency as a new generation examine the received opinions of their predecessors, and begin to establish a different view of English music in the nineteen thirties.

In 2001 Martin Anderson, writing in the Independent, called Maconchy 'Our finest lost composer'. 2007, her centenary year, offers opportunities to rediscover her. Anniversary concerts have been given by Park Lane Group, Diana Ambache, and Ireland's National Chamber Choir; there are a couple of Prom matinee performances. A number of chamber ensembles and choirs from all over Britain have included her work and notably, Independent Opera are staging two of her operas at Sadlers Wells in November. Maconchy was featured on BBC Radio 3's 'Composer of the Week', and this was especially welcome, since the value of celebrating a centenary lies not in its retrospective aspect but in its capacity as a pointer to the future.

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## Part 2 (1945-1994)

This article continues my previous essay on Maconchy She is referred to as EM and her husband William LeFanu as WRL.

In the ten years following the war, Maconchy composed prolifically: string quartets nos 5 and 6, her orchestral *Nocturne* (1950) and the magnificent *Symphony for Double String Orchestra* (1952), and a number of concerti for leading performers, notably the *Concertino for Clarinet*, for Frederick Thurston and the *Concertino for Bassoon* and Strings for Gwydion Brooke. There was another piano concertino (1949) premiered by Margaret Kitchin and several works for voice, first performed by Joan Cross and Sophie Wyss. Two of these, *Sonnet Sequence* and *A Winter's Tale*, were settings of the contemporary poet Kenneth Gee; they were followed in 1951 by *Six Settings of Poems by Yeats*, (for soprano and SSA choir, also premiered by Sophie Wyss.) There was also the *Duo for violin and cello*, for her close friends Anne Macnaghten and Arnold Ashby, and a number of pieces for children.

Yet this substantial output did not mean that composing came easily to her. In the three years after the war, she worked on a symphony which she withdrew after its first performance. Her letters to Grace Williams reveal the extent of her self criticism and her dissatisfaction with herself and the symphony. These were not easy years for her; she felt isolated, living in the country with no 'extended family' to help her with two young children. It was very different from the international success she had had before the war. Nor were the post war years easy for any women, a phenomenon noted by a number of historians. My own earliest memories of EM are of hearing her compose at the piano after I had gone to bed. It was her only time for composition, and she spoke later of 'falling asleep in the small hours, my head on the keyboard'.

*String Quartet no.5* (1948) won the Edwin Evans prize, and proved to be one of her most successful quartets: it also proved that adverse circumstances may have no direct bearing on works of art. EM wrote it in Dublin, where her elder daughter was in hospital with appendicitis, while the younger one (myself) was in London, in hospital in Gt. Ormond St. Another prize winning work was the overture *Proud Thames*, which won the LCC prize for a Coronation Overture. Its premiere in October 1953 was a gala occasion in the Royal Festival Hall, with the BBC Symphony Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent.

A new opportunity came in 1957 when, for the New Opera Company, Maconchy wrote *The Sofa*; it became the first of her trilogy of chamber operas. She seized and welcomed the chance, feeling that the new challenge was exactly what she wanted. *The Sofa*, libretto by Ursula Vaughan Williams, was premiered in December 1958; that year she completed *The Three Strangers*, libretto after Thomas Hardy, and in 1960/1, *The Departure*, libretto by Anne Ridler. The three one-act operas each play for about 40 minutes and are dramatically contrasting, while sharing similar orchestral forces. *The Sofa* is a French farce; the story, after Crebillon fils, was probably suggested by Ralph Vaughan Williams. It is a sexy and deliciously absurd fairy tale. *The Departure* is a tragedy, its evocative libretto giving EM the opportunity for radiant vocal lines.

For *The Three Strangers* Maconchy devised her own libretto, using Hardy's dramatisation (*The Three Wayfarers*) of his own short story. The play is written in brief conversational dialogue, but Maconchy knew better than to create an opera of endless recitative. So as to have texts suitable for arias, she chose lines from Hardy's poem 'Not only I' and from several poems by William Barnes, the Dorset poet Hardy championed. These gave the opportunities for reflection, and for extended lyric forms, which can save an opera from continual arioso. Then, so that her chorus could sing and dance with zest, she wove into her score words and tunes from Dorset folksongs. Last, but in no way least, Hardy's narrative descriptions of the wild stormy night are captured in the orchestral music.

Writing for opera allowed Maconchy to develop her dramatic instincts, and it also encouraged her to extend her musical language. People who had thought of her music as very intellectual, concise and dissonant, were surprised to discover how lyrical and expressive it was. (In truth, these qualities were always there, and were praised in her early work; but after the war, people knew less of her work and so were apt to generalise about it.)

In the operas, melodies flower, the harmonic language becomes much more sensuous, and the rhythmic drive is harnessed to dramatic ends. That the operas mark something of a turning point is borne out by the chamber works that follow: *Reflections* (1960) for oboe, clarinet viola and harp, commissioned by the BBC for the Melos Ensemble, or the *Clarinet quintet* (1963), written for Gervase de Peyer. This is a brilliant piece: everything grows organically from the opening few notes, but the lyricism and boundless vitality of the clarinet quintet show the extent to which the operatic experience has enriched EM's work.

It is equally apparent in her next big orchestra work, the *Serenata Concertante* for violin and orchestra, a Feeney Trust commission for Manoug Parikian and the CBSO. Like the chamber works, it shows what a steady evolution took place in EM's language. She had left behind a harmony based on familiar tonal or modal hierarchies, for a language that is more exploratory. Her melodies became more expansive and her sensitivity to timbre, notable from her earliest work, was strengthened through her contact with a new generation of outstanding performers. Hallmarks remain: she never lost her early contrapuntal skill, with a flair for a counterpoint of rhythms as well as melodies; and she retained too her characteristic economy of means, in which all the material in a piece is drawn out of what she called the *donné*.

With these very successful works from the early 1960s, EM began an extraordinarily fruitful era of composition. During the next twenty-five years she wrote over thirty substantial works and a similar number of smaller pieces. She wrote both for the most distinguished musicians of the day, and for a younger generation who were discovering her work and seeking her out.

The 1960s also saw her re-emergence into a more public role. As Chairman of the Composer's Guild she worked tirelessly for greater recognition for British composers. She represented them in Canada (1961) and in Russia (1962). She sowed the seed which was to become the BMIC when she established a core library of scores by living British composers, at Senate house (library of the University of London). She sought better conditions (fees and rights) for composers, and when the Guild seemed under threat persuaded her old acquaintance Benjamin Britten to lend his name to it. She served too on advisory panels for the BBC and the Arts Council and was an active member of the SPNM's Council, and Chair of its executive committee.

Unseen, but very important, was the encouragement she gave to the many young composers who wrote to her or sent their works, asking for her advice. She knew what it was to have both public acclaim and discouraging neglect, and gave practical advice and solace in equal measure to her correspondents. She enjoyed, too, the new friendships among a younger generation of her peers - Thea Musgrave, Richard Rodney Bennett, Jeremy Dale Roberts.

With her family grown, it was much easier for her to travel to the increasing number of performances she was receiving, and for EM and WRL to be in London to hear new music and new opera. I began to attend new music concerts with her at this time, so I know how open minded and adventurous she was; with concert going and listening keenly to the BBC's Third programme, she always wanted to keep up to date with new developments.

Much of EM's output during these later years was vocal. She was constantly in demand for commissions, ranging from songs and a *cappella* choral pieces to larger scale works for voices and instruments, not least her big dramatic cantata *Heloise and Abelard* (1978). A recent study of her choral music (Catherine Roma, Scarecrow Press 2006) makes an invaluable introduction to this repertoire.

A typical example of the lyrical voice of her maturity is the little choral piece from 1965, *Nocturnal*. It begins with a spring serenade and moves through a scherzando courtship to a sensuous consummation. Characteristically, the settings are concise, the three apparently disparate texts (William Barnes, Edward Thomas, and Shelley) linked with the motive 'will you come?' Yet despite the brevity, she catches the essence of each poem.

A poet to whom she turned repeatedly was Gerard Manley Hopkins; she shared his fascination with poetic rhythm and she was fired by his imagery. There are choral settings, with brass and with instrumental ensemble, and there is a beautiful work for high voice with chamber orchestra, setting *The Starlight Night, Peace* and *The May Magnificat*. Many singer friends invited her to write for them: Peter Pears, Noelle Barker, Jane Manning, Tracey Chadwell; among conductors who sought works from her, Graham Treacher, John Poole and Stephen Wilkinson were often associated with her premieres. Of her cantatas, *Ariadne*, with a text by Day Lewis, (beautifully recorded by Heather Harper) and *Heloise and Abelard* both have impassioned and dramatic vocal writing; an opera composer *manqué*, perhaps. EM had followed her operatic trilogy with a masque, *The Jesse Tree*, an 'extravaganza' for young people, *The Birds*, and a children's opera, *The King of the Golden River*, all of which were successfully staged; but she never had a substantial, fully professional opera commission.

Instrumental music was certainly not neglected during the seventies and eighties. The cycle of string quartets grew to thirteen, from no.8 (1966) to *Quartetto Corto* (no.13) of 1984. The importance of the cycle was acknowledged by its complete recording, issued by Unicorn-Kanchana in 1989/90 (and recently re-issued by Regis: Forum, FRC 9301). The cycle was also broadcast complete on more than one occasion. Other chamber works were commissions from friends: Thea King, Janet Craxton, Evelyn Rothwell, Kenneth Heath, Osian Ellis, Nicholas Logie, Stephen Isserlis. There were small scale concerti, for clarinet (Janet Hilton), viola (Paul Silverthorne) and some larger works for strings: *Epyllion*, (1973) for solo cello and string ensemble, and *Music for Strings* (1983), the last of her many Prom commissions. *Epyllion* is notable for the textures and timbres of its novel sound world, indicating how far EM had travelled in her musical lifetime.

Among the late works, my own favourite is *My Dark Heart*, (1981) commissioned by the RCM for their centenary. Scored for soprano and six instruments, Maconchy set three Petrarch sonnets in the translation by Synge. Petrarch is mourning his dead love, Laura, and Synge's Anglo-Irish turns of phrase were very familiar to EM; it was the language of her childhood. It is a haunting work with a valedictory quality, as if EM too was preparing for death. Certainly, in her later years, she took certain steps in recognition of her age and failing health; she withdrew some orchestral works, and ceased composing in 1986, saying she did not want to add to her canon any works that were not worthy of it.

A number of public honours came her way: Fellowship of the College and the Academy, a medal from the Worshipful Company of Musicians, an Honorary Fellowship at St Hilda's College Oxford, and in 1977, a CBE. This was followed ten years later by a DBE. In 1976, following the death of Benjamin Britten, she was elected President of the SPNM.

Also important was the recognition accorded by concerts held in her honour. When she was seventy, the Park Lane Group gave an all Maconchy programme, and SPNM included *The Land* in an orchestral concert; it received a standing ovation, a very rare accolade in UK. Throughout her seventies she was widely performed and broadcast, and continued to travel to premieres throughout the UK and overseas. Her eightieth birthday was marked by a wonderful concert party given by a number of illustrious artists; and her eighty-fifth by quartet concerts, by a series of BBC Singers concerts and also, in Norwich, a performance of her bassoon concerto with her eldest grandson Christopher Dunlop as soloist.

Although Maconchy is included in many publications, there is still no single monograph or biography; the publication by Ashgate of her correspondence with Grace Williams, currently being edited by Jenny Doctor and Sophie Fuller, will go some way towards remedying this. The best documentation can be found in Margaret Williams' film, made for Channel 4 in the nineteen eighties. The biography, narrated by EM herself, is set in the context of the music; it is a brilliant film.

The centenary of her birth has created a welcome opportunity for her music to come into the repertoire once more. The correspondence that followed BBCR3's 'Composer of the Week' makes it clear that her music is much loved, both by those who were already familiar with it and by those who are discovering it. I believe it will continue to delight performers and listeners for many years to come.