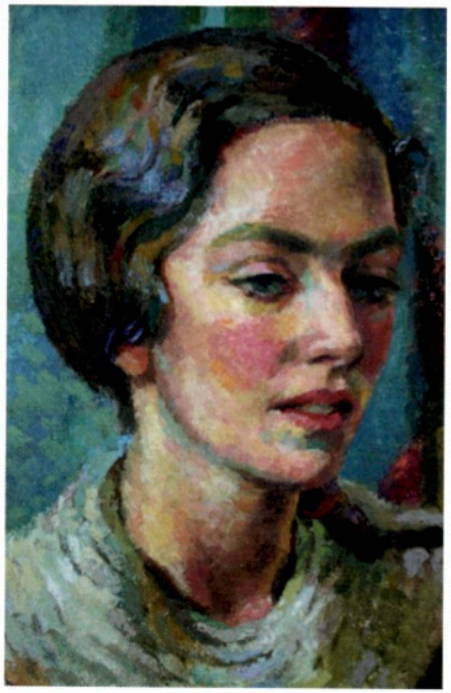
ELIZABETH MACONCHY
Music as Impassioned Argument

EDITED BY
CHRISTA BRÜSTLE
AND
DANIELLE SOFER



Christa Brüstle
Anna Dunlop
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STUDIEN ZUR WERTUNGSFORSCHUNG

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Alle musikalische Praxis ist von Wertungen durchzogen. Das Publikum wertet Interpreten und Komponisten, auf oder ab; Interpreten lieben oder respektieren bestimmte Werke und ignorieren andere; Komponisten achten das Publikum oder mißachten es. Wie aber solche Wertungen zustande kommen, weshalb sie sich durchsetzen oder nicht durchsetzen, und welche Maßstäbe ihnen zugrunde liegen, das verstehen wir viel zu wenig, und müssen es auch immer neu verstehen, denn etablierte Wertungen geraten außer Kurs und andere kommen in Geltung. Um Fragen dieser Art nachzugehen, begründete Harald Kaufmann 1968 die *Studien zur Wertungsforschung*. Wertungen, fand Kaufmann, sind kein undurchdringlich Letztes, Gefühle, über die sich nicht streiten ließe. Sie sind der Reflexion und Argumenten zugänglich wie auch bedürftig. Die verschiedenartigen Haltungen der Menschen stellen sie vor verschiedenartige Werte. Es mag keine höhere Warte – keinen ‚ästhetischen Standpunkt' – geben, von der aus die Gesamtheit der Werte in einem einzigen Wert – der ‚Schönheit' etwa – zu betrachten wäre. Doch Wertfreiheit wäre auch für das Nachdenken über Musik kein gangbarer Weg. Wer verlangte, sich im Umgang mit Musik der Wertung zu enthalten, verstümmelte die Verständnisfähigkeit.

Musical practice is permeated by valuation and judgment. Audiences judge performers and composers; performers dote on and honour certain works while disregarding others; composers respect audiences or despise them. How do such valuations come about? Why do some valuations prevail while others fade into oblivion? And which standards, if any, underlie them? Such matters must be explored ever anew, for established valuations lose credit just as fresh ones arise and spread. In 1968 Harald Kaufmann founded *Studien zur Wertungsforschung*, enlisting the resources of philosophical aesthetics for understanding questions such as these. Valuations, Kaufmann argued, are not mere opaque feelings lying outside the realm of reasoned dispute. Rather, valuations are amenable to and stand in need of reflection and argument. Human attitudes manifest a diversity of values. There may not be a single elevated stance – such as an 'aesthetic standpoint' or the aspiration toward beauty – from which we are able to contemplate the entirety of musical values. On the other hand, abstaining from valuation, or pretending that valuation is beyond the realm of scholarly inquiry are not viable options for the study of music. To the contrary, inquiry into these subjects is a prerequisite for a full understanding of music.

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Edited by Christa Brüstle and Danielle Sofer

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CHRISTA BRÜSTLE / DANIELLE SOFER

Introduction

Dame Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–1994) is among the outstanding British composers of the 20th century. Initially a student of Vaughan Williams, she became fascinated early on – during the 1920s – by Bartók's music, which set her on a Continental track distinctly from many of her colleagues, who at the time cultivated the splendid isolation of their Englishness. Maconchy's music gained strong resonances on the continent; by 1936 her works had been played in Eastern Europe, France, Germany, but also the US and Australia. In this regard, sadly, World War II marked a break; from then on up until now, her work has had narrower lasting success internationally.

It is widely assumed that chamber music forms the centre of Maconchy's *oeuvre*. She herself called the thirteen string quartets she wrote between 1933 and 1984 "my best and most deeply-felt works". This book, however, explores a wider range of Maconchy's compositions, including opera and orchestral works. Within Maconchy's development, the collection reflects upon technical and spiritual aspects of her music, and contextualizes her music both in the mostly male musical world of 20th century Britain, dominated by Elgar, Delius, Vaughan Williams, Walton, Tippett and Britten, and that of continental Europe. *Vis-à-vis* these contexts, Maconchy spoke a voice of her own, aspiring overall to "express in music" that which is "passionately intellectual and intellectually passionate."[1]

Maconchy showed great promise in music from a young age, and in 1923 her mother moved her from Dublin to London in order to study at the Royal College of Music. There she studied composition with Ralph Vaughan Williams, an influential figure in the British musical "renaissance" at the time.[2] As well regarded as she was at the College, it was not until she was awarded the Octavia scholarship for travel abroad in 1929 that she truly gained momentum. Vaughan Williams encouraged her to go to Vienna, which he felt encapsulated the prestige of European music. However,

ensuing her studies, Maconchy was keener on Prague – the musical epicentre of the day – ensuring that she would keep ahead of the musical current. In Prague, she met several important musicians, including Erwin Schulhoff, who would then go on to premiere her Piano Concertino in 1930 with her teacher Karel Jirák at the podium. Upon her return to London that year, she was honoured with a premiere of her orchestral work *The Land* at the Proms. Despite a small setback with Tuberculosis, the '30s proved to be extremely productive for Maconchy. In 1933, she published her First String Quartet of thirteen, and the second would appear within four years. Her Oboe Quintet was awarded a prize by the *Daily Telegraph*, and by the end of the decade she would give birth to her first daughter, Anna. Several more prizes were to come in the next years, including the Edwin Evans prize for her Fifth String Quartet in 1948 and a London County Council prize for the Coronation overture *Proud Thames* in 1953.

It was in 1959 that Elizabeth Maconchy became the Chair of the prestigious Composers' Guild of Great Britain, having thus proved herself an important and capable colleague to assume the great responsibilities of the position. A remarkably productive composer, this accomplishment only marks the halfway point of a nearly sixty-year career, the height of which came in 1987 when she was named Dame of the British Empire in the Honours List at age 80, joining Dame Ethel Smyth (1858–1944), the only other British woman to gain the title before that time.

The essays in this collection were originally solicited for a two-day symposium held in celebration of Elizabeth Maconchy's life and work on October 24–25, 2014 at the University of Music and Performing Arts Graz, Austria. The organizers of the symposium, Christa Brüstle (Chair of the Centre for Gender Studies) and Andreas Dorschel (Chair of the Institute for Music Aesthetics) recognized a gap in the musicological literature, the absence of a volume dedicated solely to one of the most celebrated, accomplished, and driven composers of the twentieth century – Elizabeth Maconchy.[3] They therefore invited a slew of diverse authors, from those with extensive experience with Maconchy's music and the context in which she lived, to members of the composer's family, to musicologists who developed interest in Maconchy's works in the process of preparing for the symposium. In putting together this volume, we have gathered a wealth of biographical information, through private correspondences and the recollections of Maconchy's two daughters, as well as essays discussing specific musical works from historical, contextual, and analytical

perspectives. The book is organized in roughly three sections, beginning with two contextualising essays by Maconchy's daughters, Nicola LeFanu and Anna Dunlop. The latter, Maconchy's first daughter, a mathematician by training and practice, has generously provided photographs of the composer [pp. 30–37], her family and various relevant musical acquaintances. Dunlop's charming and intimate recollection places these images in context within Maconchy's day-to-day existence, beginning from the composer's family history and on through the author's own memories of her mother. Maconchy's younger daughter Nicola LeFanu, a composer in her own right, combines the unique perspective of a familiar account with the observations of a professional colleague. Her contribution explores the wide breadth of her mother's music by perusing correlations among works of different eras of productivity in the composer's lifetime.

The second part of the book opens with a detailed survey of Maconchy's correspondence with friend and fellow composer, Grace Williams. Sophie Fuller's thorough engagement with the letters exchanged between these two minds has gained her unequaled insight into the composers' everyday activities, their composing habits, as well as their familial and social obligations beyond writing music. Fuller and Jenny Doctor plan to publish a full-length volume on the correspondences, therefore, our readers are fortunate to be given a preview of this material through select excerpts of the letters and a detailed and down right entertaining purview into these friendly exchanges. The letters provide insight into Maconchy's relationship with Williams as well as showing additional connections to other women in their circle of composers, including Dorothy Gow (1893–1982) and Elisabeth Lutyens (1906–1983). Although the Royal College of Music (RCM) appeared to provide a supportive environment for women composers in the 1920s, these women nevertheless faced challenges that seem to have contributed to their difficulty breaking through to wider popularity. Maconchy, for example, was not awarded the College's prestigious Mendelssohn Scholarship, purportedly because she would have squandered the opportunity by having a family. Through Maconchy's letters we see that, although she did indeed take the time to have children, this did not preclude her from pursuing her passions. In their respective essays, Fuller and the composer's daughters LeFanu and Dunlop fondly recall Maconchy's insistence on balancing family obligations with finding time to compose music.

The Maconchy-Williams correspondence then opens the door to a section of comparative essays. Annika Forkert and Christa Brüstle look respectively at Maconchy's work within the context of her contemporaries, and Guido Heldt performs a comparative analysis of Maconchy's music within the context of her own *oeuvre*. The local contemporaries in Forkert's essay, William Walton (1902–1983), Michael Tippett (1905–1998), and Benjamin Britten (1913–76), were part of a new generation of composer "strongly influenced by continental developments." [4] Forkert therefore positions Maconchy's output within the common currents of her immediate surroundings in attempts to explain why it is that Maconchy's reputation may not have been as long-standing as her contemporaries, whether, for instance, on account of her gender or her musical inclinations.

Guido Heldt's essay demonstrates Maconchy's compositional breadth, with examples primarily of chamber music from a wide variety of musical instruments. Heldt identifies Maconchy as exceptional among her contemporaries for her avoidance of the common pastoralism which many other English composers descended. Despite retaining a tonal palette, her music holds a modern bite to rival the most extreme modernists.

Brüstle's comparison of Maconchy to Béla Bartók (1881–1945) situates Maconchy's international presence in comparison of an influential composer, and a particularly inspiring one for Maconchy. This essay addresses the question of genre in English music at the turn of the twentieth century, turning a spotlight on the 'ultra modern' influence Bartók may have had on Maconchy's compositional approach. Brüstle traces Bartók's abandonment of nineteenth-century practices in his 'conversion' to objectivity and constructivism, exemplified by the use of short motivic cells in his string quartets to unify thematic material. The analysis links these processes of thematic fragmentation and development to Maconchy's strings quartets following her first (suspected) encounter with his music in 1926. Such motivic cells – what Maconchy refers to as the "*donné*" in her autobiographical essay "The Composer Speaks" – feature prominently in many of Maconchy's works as explored also in the analyses of Rhiannon Mathias and Danielle Sofer. Tracing the origins of this compositional technique to such a historical precedence serves as much to solidify Maconchy's reputation as a composer with her finger on the pulse of contemporary music as it does to situate her output historically within the accepted twentieth-century musical canon. Following from this comparison, the essays in the latter section of the book take specific pieces as their focus.

Historically the rift between theory and analysis can be seen as occurring on the back of musical works. Analysis is a way of better understanding an individual composition, but, more than this, one hopes that musical analyses will provide some sort of theoretical insight either into a composer's greater compositional trends or, more abstractly, to the inclinations of a certain era of thinkers and creators. The third part of this book consists of analyses of individual works, namely Maconchy's string quartets and operas. Contributions from Rhiannon Mathias, Sophia Leithold, and Danielle Sofer recognize Maconchy's tendency to employ short motivic cells to attain larger structural unity. In this way, we could say that, as a composer, Maconchy took pleasure in representing large-scale formal schemes in the most minute and intimate moments of her music.

As already remarked, Maconchy's string quartets are probably the most celebrated portion of her compositional output. Rhiannon Mathias takes a look at the late quartets, focusing in particular on String Quartet No. 9, to demonstrate Maconchy's common elaboration of short, motivic cells. As Mathias characterizes this approach, it is "as if Maconchy is looking at her material through a musical prism," the reflections of which appear in the crooks of many works.[5] Whereas the quartets demonstrate the abstracted musico-dramatic significance of the technique, Leithold's essay on Maconchy's one-act opera *The Sofa* (1955–57) and Sofer's essay on *The Departure* (1960–61) combine aspects of plot and character development to explore the technique's narrative potential.

Sophia Leithold's essay explores *The Sofa* (1955–57), the music's farcical and erotic themes. Pointing to one particularly salacious motive, Leithold tracks its occurrence and transformation through many iterations–variation being cause for dramatic effect.

The Departure tells a tragic story of separation. With only two characters – husband Mark and wife Julia, an offstage chorus, and a small chamber orchestra, *Departure*'s suspenseful plot is mere fodder for its psychologically invasive music. In this, the second work of her first trilogy of operas, Maconchy employs the dramatic tension quintessential to her chamber works, while exposing its contrapuntal intricacies by way of a musical negotiation of two characters. Following Mathias' example, Sofer's analysis demonstrates Maconchy's elaboration of short, motivic cells in the context of a dramatic work.

Our collection culminates in an as yet unequalled bibliography of texts about Maconchy and a complete list of her compositions, assembled by

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January 2018

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ANNOTATIONS

1 Elizabeth Maconchy, 'String Quartet No. 6', unpublished talk, Oxford, 3 February 1952, manuscript held at St. Hilda's College Library, Oxford, quoted in Jenny Doctor, 'The Texture of Silence', in *Silence, Music, Silent Music*, ed. Nicky Losseff and Jennifer Ruth Doctor, Aldershot 2007, p. 22.

2 Cf. Rhiannon Mathias, *Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music: A Blest Trio of Sirens*, Farnham/Burlington 2012, p. 1.

3 Elizabeth Maconchy features prominently in ibid. and Catherine Roma, *The Choral Music of Twentieth-Century Women Composers: Elizabeth Lutyens, Elizabeth Maconchy, and Thea Musgrave*, Oxford 2006.

4 Mathias, *Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams* (note 2) , p. 1.

5 See Rhiannon Mathias's article in this volume, pp. 150–163.