



Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music: A Blest Trio of Sirens

Rhiannon Mathias

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Elisabeth Lutyens (1906-1983), Elizabeth Maconchy (1907-1994) and Grace Williams (1906-1977) were contemporaries at the Royal College of Music. The three composers' careers were launched with performances in the Macnaghten-Lemare Concerts in the 1930s - a time when, in Britain, as Williams noted, a woman composer was considered 'very odd indeed'. Even so, by the early 1940s all three had made remarkable advances in their work: Lutyens had become the first British composer to use 12-note technique, in her Chamber Concerto No. 1 (1939-40); Maconchy had composed four string quartets of outstanding quality and was busy rethinking the genre; and Williams had won recognition as a composer with great flair for orchestral writing with her Fantasia on Welsh Nursery Tunes (1940) and Sea Sketches (1944). In the following years, Lutyens, Maconchy and Williams went on to compose music of striking quality and to attain prominent positions within the British music scene. Their respective achievements broke through the 'sound ceiling', challenging many of the traditional assumptions which accompanied music by female composers. Rhiannon Mathias traces the development of these three important composers through analysis of selected works. The book draws upon previously unexplored material as well as radio and television interviews with the composers themselves and with their contemporaries. The musical analysis and contextual material lead to a re-evaluation of the composers' positions in the context of twentieth-century British music history.

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