

English Music in the 20th Century

Elizabeth Maconchy 1907 —1994

Elizabeth Maconchy was a composer of great versatility and unfailing integrity, amply deserving of a British critic's description of her as 'one of the most substantial composers these islands have yet produced'. Born to Irish parents in Hertfordshire on 19 March 1907, she grew up in rural Ireland, playing the piano and writing music from the age of six. She studied at the Royal College of Music with Vaughan Williams, who remained a lifelong friend; but she was attracted less by English pastoralism than by the central European modernism of Bartók and Janáček, and she completed her studies with K.B. Jirák in Prague. After her return to England, her career was launched by the successful premiere of her suite *The Land* under Sir Henry Wood in the 1930 Proms season; this was followed by performances of her music at the pioneering Macnaghten-Lemare Concerts and in several European cities.



In the post-war era, Maconchy was greatly in demand as a composer amongst the leading professional ensembles, orchestras and soloists of the day, whilst also writing for amateurs and students, and was recognised as a leader of her profession: she chaired the Composers' Guild of Great Britain, was President of the Society for the Promotion of New Music, and in 1987 was appointed Dame of the British Empire. She lived in an Essex village with her husband, the scholar and medical historian William LeFanu, to whom she was married for over sixty years; the younger of their two daughters is the composer Nicola LeFanu. 'Betty' Maconchy, as she was affectionately known by many, died in November 1994.

While Maconchy's musical language evolved over the years, her works always enshrined her conception of music as 'an intellectual art, a balanced and reasoned statement of ideas, an impassioned argument, an intense but disciplined expression of emotion'. She used these words in explaining her attachment to the medium of the string quartet, which resulted in an outstanding sequence of thirteen quartets, spanning more than fifty years. They dominate her catalogue of chamber music, though complemented by many other beautifully fashioned chamber and instrumental works, large and small. Similarly, works for strings are prominent in the list of her orchestral works; but there are also pieces for full orchestra, including a couple written for young performers without any watering-down of their language, and a number of concertante works, all perfectly suited to their solo instrument or instruments.

Maconchy's dramatic instincts found expression in a sharply contrasting triptych of modestly scaled one-act operas, and equally in the ambitious cantata *Héloïse and Abelard* for soloists, chorus and orchestra. Choral music on a smaller scale includes several imaginatively conceived works for mixed chorus with chamber ensemble. And the lyrical side of her musical personality comes to the fore in her writing for solo voice, with piano, chamber orchestra and, in the ravishing late cycle *My Dark Heart*, ensemble. All in all, then, there are few areas of the repertoire which have not been enriched by Elizabeth Maconchy's music, and there is much in her output which urgently awaits rediscovery by a new generation of performers and listeners.