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"What a delicious, what a malicious imputation!" Gender and Politics in the Reception of Elizabeth Maconchy's *The Sofa*

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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA  
RIVERSIDE

“What a delicious, what a malicious imputation!”  
Gender and Politics in the Reception of Elizabeth Maconchy’s *The Sofa*

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction  
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

in

Music

by

Erica Janice Siegel

June 2012

Thesis Committee:

Dr. Byron Adams, Chairperson

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Dr. Leonora Saavedra

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2012

The Thesis of Erica Janice Siegel is approved:

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## INTRODUCTION

It is always difficult to guess what effect the perspective of time will give. Who, once popular, will vanish from sight in a few years, or in a century, who will continue to hold public affection, and who will be rediscovered as a major voice after suffering a lifetime of neglect?<sup>1</sup>

Despite being hailed as one of the finest composers of her day, Elizabeth Maconchy (1907-1994) and her music are unaccountably neglected today. Regarded as one of the most brilliant students at the Royal College of Music in the late 1920s, she earned high praise from Ralph Vaughan Williams, Hugh Allen, and Henry Wood. In August of 1930, the première of her orchestral suite *The Land*, garnered great acclaim, and critics hailed her as one of the most promising young composers. Sadly, her early success would prove evanescent. While her talent was often acknowledged, it was not enough to earn her opportunities equal to that enjoyed by her male colleagues.

While Maconchy remains best known today for her orchestral works and cycle of thirteen string quartets, in the late 1950s her compositional career moved in another direction. Facing a compositional block, she began to experiment with different genres, and sought out the advice of her former teacher, Ralph Vaughan Williams. Acting on his counsel and encouragement, Maconchy composed three one-act operas between 1956 and 1961: *The Sofa* (1956-57), *The Three Strangers* (1957-58), and *The Departure* (1960-61).

Her first opera, *The Sofa* stands out as an anomaly. Based on the libertine novel *Le Sopha, conte moral* (1742) by Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon (1707-1777), the

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<sup>1</sup> Ursula Vaughan Williams, "Reviews: *The Music Makers: Heirs and Rebels of the English Musical Renaissance, Edward Elgar to Benjamin Britten* by Michael Trend," *Folk Music Journal* 5, no. 1 (1985): 119.



comic opera's racy subject matter, with a libretto by Ursula Vaughan Williams, represents a stark departure from the more serious themes of her other works. Premiered at Sadler's Wells Theatre on December 13, 1959, the opera received mixed reviews, as Edmund Tracey of *The Observer* remarked:

“The Sofa” is unique in that it includes the only attempt I have ever seen to present the act of copulation on the public stage – and that this was achieved, both vigorously and without offence, reflects the very credibility upon the ingenuity of the two ladies who, with every appearance of moral health and charm, came to bow and beam at us at the end.<sup>2</sup>

While tales of sexual exploits abound in opera, the British stage was heavily censored. Beginning with the Licensing Act of 1737, which was subsequently replaced by the Theatres Act of 1843, all works on the public stage were subject to the approval of the Lord Chamberlain until the act was abolished in 1968. By the late 1950s, however, censorship of heterosexual erotic behavior had begun to ease. Due to its eroticism, *The Sofa* occupies a curious place in the history of British opera. Largely the creation of Maconchy and Ursula Vaughan Williams, its utterly unabashed treatment of sexuality is remarkable for its frankness. Perhaps all the more surprising for the time period is that two women produced such a salacious opera.

After the high spirit of *The Sofa*, Maconchy turned to more serious subjects, writing about the complexities of grief and loss in *The Departure*. Yet, the story of *The Sofa* continues to raise many questions regarding the reception of Maconchy's music. Why did the pre-war years prove to be more favorable for Maconchy, as contrasted with the indifferent reception of her music during and after the war? While gender

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<sup>2</sup> Edmund Tracey, “Two New Operas,” *The Observer*, December 20, 1959.

discrimination is often cited as a factor, it fails to fully account for her early success. The opera's reception is enlightening not only for reactions to the opera's subject matter, but also for general reactions to Maconchy's music, which reflect the changing tides of musical taste in Britain. While Maconchy continued to compose until 1986, she never fully regained the level of acclaim and popularity that she had enjoyed in the 1930s. More recently, a series of concerts in 2007 to mark her centenary has sparked a renewed interest in her music, so that it is beginning to receive the attention that it clearly merits.

## CHAPTER ONE

### Elizabeth Maconchy: a brief introduction to her life and works

#### Early life

Elizabeth Violet Maconchy was born on March 19, 1907, in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire.<sup>1</sup> The second of three daughters of Violet Mary, née Poë, a homemaker, and Gerald Edward Campbell Maconchy, a solicitor, Maconchy spent the early years of her childhood in Buckinghamshire. As both of Maconchy's parents were Irish by birth, holidays were sometimes spent with her maternal grandparents at Santry Court, an eighteenth-century estate north of Dublin. In 1919, the family relocated to the seaside town of Howth in north Dublin, after Gerald Maconchy contracted tuberculosis.<sup>2</sup>

While music never played a prominent role in the Maconchy household, Elizabeth's interest in music became clear by the age of six, as she had been "...found at the piano, picking out tunes,"<sup>3</sup> an impulse that quickly expanded to the composing of small piano pieces. While Maconchy's father had some familiarity with the piano, her

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<sup>1</sup> I have encountered some discrepancies regarding the exact place of Maconchy's birth. Jennifer Doctor, in her entry on Elizabeth Maconchy in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, v. 35, 2004, has listed Maconchy's birthplace as Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire. The entry on Maconchy in *Grove Music Online*, on the other hand, lists her birthplace as Broxbourne, Hertfordshire. Based on email correspondence with Maconchy's daughter, the composer Nicola LeFanu, who confirmed that Maconchy was born in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire, it appears that the *GMO* entry is incorrect.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Doctor, "Maconchy, Elizabeth Violet," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, ed. H.C.G. Matthew and Brian Harrison (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 971.

<sup>3</sup> Nicola LeFanu, "Elizabeth Maconchy DBE (1907-1994): some biographical and musical notes by her daughter Nicola LeFanu. Part 1: 1907-1945" (Program notes from 2007, emailed by LeFanu to author). A similar version can also be found online: [http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2007/Oct07/Maconchy\\_LeFanu.htm](http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2007/Oct07/Maconchy_LeFanu.htm) (accessed September 1, 2011).

mother was unmusical, and one of her sisters was tone-deaf.<sup>4</sup> In an interview with John Skiba in 1978, Maconchy elaborates, “It came completely out of the blue. We moved to Ireland when I was quite small, my family being unmusical I didn’t hear any music at all except what I could play myself.”<sup>5</sup>

In Dublin, Maconchy received piano and composition lessons, and continued to compose small pieces for piano.<sup>6</sup> Aside from her lessons, Maconchy’s exposure to musical performances was severely limited, as the family did not have a gramophone. It was not until 1922, at the age of fifteen, that she attended her first orchestral concert, a performance of Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony by the Hallé Orchestra in Dublin.<sup>7</sup>

### R.C.M. Years

After the death of Gerald Maconchy in 1922, the family returned to England in 1923, settling in London. On the advice of her teachers in Dublin, Maconchy enrolled at the Royal College of Music. Writing about her arrival at the R.C.M. in an article for *Composer* in 1971, Maconchy notes:

I came to the Royal College of Music from Ireland when I was sixteen – which is nearly half a century ago. I had been writing music since I was six, but knew

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<sup>4</sup> Anne Macnaghten, “Elizabeth Maconchy,” *The Musical Times* 96, no. 1348 (June 1955): 298.

<sup>5</sup> John Skiba, “Elizabeth Maconchy in Conversation with John Skiba,” *Composer* 63 (1978): 7.

<sup>6</sup> Macnaghten’s article lists Maconchy’s piano teacher as a Mrs. Boxwell and her composition teacher as Dr. Larchet. Mrs. Boxwell appears most likely to have been Edith Boxwell, a pupil of Dina Copeman. Dr. Larchet appears most likely to be John Francis Larchet (1884-1967), an Irish composer who taught counterpoint at the Royal Irish Academy of Music from 1920 to 1955. See: Charles Acton, “Irish Pianists,” *Irish Arts Review* 5 (1988-89): 116-124; and Jennifer O’Connor, “The Role of Women in Music in Nineteenth-Century Dublin” (Ph.D. dissertation, National University of Ireland, Maynooth, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> Sophie Fuller, “Elizabeth Maconchy,” *The Pandora Guide to Women Composers: Britain and the United States 1629-Present* (London: Pandora, 1994), 198-202.

very little other music except what I could play on the piano, and I had only once heard an orchestra. So coming to London as a music student was a first plunge into life, and once I had found my feet I enjoyed my time at the R.C.M. immensely.<sup>8</sup>

At the Royal College of Music, Maconchy initially studied composition with Irish composer Charles Wood, piano with Arthur Alexander, and counterpoint with Charles Herbert Kitson. In 1925, she began her studies with Ralph Vaughan Williams, whose influence would have a lasting impact: "...it was a whole new World when I became a pupil of his, not so much from his teaching as just from him as a person, his attitude to music, he was a tremendously inspiring person."<sup>9</sup> Maconchy studied at the R.C.M. for six years and became, in the words of envious Elisabeth Lutyens, "the star pupil" with both Vaughan Williams and Hugh Allen singing her praises.<sup>10</sup>

Over the course of her studies at the R.C.M., Maconchy received numerous performances of her work through college concerts, as well as Patron's Fund rehearsals. In 1928, Hugh Allen recommended Maconchy's *Concertino for Piano and Chamber Orchestra* for a reading by the B.B.C. Orchestra (at the time, Allen was the chair of the B.B.C. Music Advisory Committee). Unfortunately, as Jennifer Doctor has noted in her extensive research on both Maconchy and the B.B.C., very little evidence survives to give any indication of how the work was received by Edward Clark, who was responsible

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<sup>8</sup> Elizabeth Maconchy, "A Composer Speaks," *Composer* 42 (Winter 1971-1972): 25.

<sup>9</sup> Skiba, 7.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Doctor, "Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams," *Women & Music* 2 (1998): 96.

for the programming of contemporary music.<sup>11</sup> However, a note by Victor Hely Hutchinson survives, which suggests that the work, with the approval of Clark, would receive a rehearsal:

This looks jolly, particularly the second movement – I can't give any definite opinion about it without hearing it, but as far as I can judge it is the work of a student with plenty of vigour and ideas, but who has not yet found her feet – & who has moreover been brought up on the strong waters of modern music more than on the milk of classical music.

I think Mr Clark should see it; & with his approval I suggest it should be put into a “try over” rehearsal.<sup>12</sup>

As Doctor has noted, while the B.B.C. appears to have been willing to consider the work for performance opportunities, Maconchy was ultimately troubled by the work's flaws and concluded that substantial revisions were needed.<sup>13</sup>

While Vaughan Williams was an important influence on Maconchy, “modern” composers, notably Bartók, became a particularly influential figure to Maconchy's emerging musical style:

In the first year with him [Vaughan Williams] I did what most of his pupils did and started to write like him, but I think I grew out of that fairly quickly, partly because when I'd been with him for about a year I suddenly discovered the music of Bartok [*sic*] which at that time wasn't really known in London. I think Vaughan-Williams [*sic*] and Bartok's [*sic*] influence had much the most effect on me during those formative years, and I don't think later influences counted nearly so much.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Doctor, “Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams,” 96.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 96

<sup>14</sup> Skiba, 8.

As a teacher, Vaughan Williams was instrumental in helping Maconchy develop her own voice. Though she often found it difficult to describe his pedagogical methods, she continued to seek out his advice and guidance until Vaughan Williams's death in 1958.<sup>15</sup>

In an article entitled "Vaughan Williams as a Teacher" (1959), Maconchy reminisces:

...he had little respect for the rules and conventional methods of teaching composition, and never followed a formal scheme.

The reason for this apparent lack of method was his complete rejection of ready-made solutions. All through his life he chose the laborious method of 'working out his own salvation' – his own phrase. And this is what he encouraged his pupils to do. His teaching, though he never said it in so many words – was always directed towards making his pupils think for themselves in their own musical language. He fully recognised the importance of adequate technique, but for him the purpose of technique was how to give the clearest expression to the musical ideas of each individual composer in his own way.<sup>16</sup>

In Maconchy's final term report at the R.C.M. in 1929, Vaughan Williams reiterated this phrase, writing: "Very sorry to lose her – but I can teach her no more – she will work for her own salvation & will go far."<sup>17</sup>

Vaughan Williams's keen interest in his student was evident early on. After only a year, he had already taken it upon himself to make inquiries on her behalf. Believing that Maconchy would greatly benefit from studying abroad, he sent a letter to Edward Dent in 1926, in which he sought out Dent's advice as to where he should send his enterprising young pupil:

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<sup>15</sup> For further discussion of Vaughan Williams's relationship with his students, see Jennifer Doctor's "'Working for her own Salvation': Vaughan Williams as teacher of Elizabeth Maconchy, Grace Williams, and Ina Boyle," in *Vaughan Williams in Perspective*, ed. Lewis Foreman (London: Albion Press, 1998), 181-201.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Maconchy, "Vaughan Williams as a Teacher," *Composer 2* (March 1959): 18-19.

<sup>17</sup> Maconchy's final term report from the Royal College of Music, Elizabeth Maconchy Archive, St. Hilda's College, Oxford. This phrase is also quoted in Doctor's "'Working for her own Salvation': Vaughan Williams as teacher of Elizabeth Maconchy, Grace Williams, and Ina Boyle," 201.

May I ask you for some advice? A composition pupil of mine at the R.C.M. whom I consider very gifted is anxious to go abroad and study music, especially composition, for 6 months, or possibly longer.

I also think it would be very good for her. Who do you consider the best composition teacher in Europe at present? And which centre do you consider the best for a young student to receive a ‘finishing’ musical education and generally to improve their musical culture. I expect you will say that the two queries are incompatible, in which case we shall have to make a compromise.

Miss Maconchy is just 19 – plays the piano quite well and has had a thorough grounding at the hands of Kitson and Charles Wood. She has – as I say – in my opinion decided inventive powers but is of course at present like all young people going through a new phase every month. At present she has been badly bitten by Bartok [*sic*] and is of course anxious to study with him, but I rather doubt the wisdom of this.

I feel possibly that Respighi or Casella might be good for her – if they ever take pupils. On the other hand, neither Rome nor Buda-Pesth [*sic*] would I imagine be good from the point of view of general musical atmosphere and the hearing of plenty of good music etc. Also of course we must consider a place where we could find a nice family for her to live with and so on.

Are Leipzig or Dresden any good nowadays? Prague has been suggested to me – what do you think of that? or I thought of sending her to Ravel but I doubt if he would take any pupils now.

I should be most grateful for your advice...<sup>18</sup>

Despite maintaining a record of remarkable progress, and receiving both the Sullivan and Cobbett prizes, as well as a Blumenthal Scholarship in 1927,<sup>19</sup> Maconchy was denied the prestigious Mendelssohn prize in 1929: “I had the interview, and the next day, Sir Hugh Allen, who was the head of the college came up to me and congratulated me on getting the scholarship and I said, ‘but I didn’t get it, you gave it to David Evans.’ He said, ‘Oh, they must have changed it after I left. Anyway if we’d given it to you

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<sup>18</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams to Edward J. Dent, July 1, 1926, in *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams 1895-1958*, ed. Hugh Cobbe (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 160.

<sup>19</sup> Royal College of Music to Elizabeth Maconchy, September 15, 1927, Elizabeth Maconchy Archive, St. Hilda’s College, Oxford.



you'd have only got married and never written another note.'"<sup>20</sup> While the scholarship went to David Moule-Evans, a pupil of Herbert Howells, Maconchy was able to study abroad when she subsequently received an Octavia Travelling Scholarship in 1929. On the advice of Vaughan Williams, she went to Prague, where she studied composition with the noted Czech composer K.B. Jirák.

### The Thirties: A decade of early success

With funds provided by the Octavia Travelling Scholarship, Maconchy was able to visit both Vienna and Paris, and spent two months in Prague studying with Jirák. On March 19, 1930, Maconchy's twenty-third birthday, the Prague Philharmonic performed her Piano Concerto in Smetana Hall. Conducted by Jirák with the composer Erwin Schulhoff at the piano, the work received highly favorable reviews: "The piano concerto by the young Irish composer, E.V. Maconchy, was the best. In spite of the natural impulses due to her youth, it shows a remarkable creative genius both in the animation and sincerity of the first and third movements and in the individual temper and fine building up of the slow movement."<sup>21</sup>

Upon her return to England, Maconchy remarks, "I did the only thing then open to a young composer – sent a score to Sir Henry Wood."<sup>22</sup> The score was an orchestral suite

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<sup>20</sup> *Elizabeth Maconchy*, documentary directed by Margaret Williams, 1985. Produced by the Arts Council of Great Britain. Transcription by author.

<sup>21</sup> Translated review of Maconchy's Piano Concerto, handwritten in pencil, from the newspaper *Venkov*, Prague, March 22, 1930, Elizabeth Maconchy Archive, St. Hilda's College, Oxford.

<sup>22</sup> Maconchy, "A Composer Speaks," 25.

entitled *The Land*. On May 22, 1930, Maconchy received an encouraging response from Sir Henry Wood:

Dear Miss Maconchy,

I have sent in the title of your Suite “The Land” for the B.B.C. Promenade Concert and I should think it is more than probable that they will include it in their rehearsal although at the moment I cannot make a definite promise of performance. Would you kindly let me know if it has ever been performed yet – and if you would like to direct it yourself.

Very truly yours  
Henry J. Wood.

In the end, it was Sir Henry Wood who conducted *The Land*, which received its première at the Proms on August 30, 1930, a week after the composer married historian and scholar William LeFanu. The press notices Maconchy received were laudatory, suggesting that she was a rising young composer. In *The Daily Telegraph*, Herbert Hughes declared: “Not only is this one of the best pieces of orchestral music written by any woman in recent years, but by far the most important and interesting work produced, so far, at the Promenade Concerts during the present season.”<sup>23</sup>

With the success of *The Land*, Maconchy seemed well on her way to establishing herself in the music scene in Britain. Nothing could have been farther from the truth, however, as Maconchy encountered great difficulty in securing performances for her works:

It [*The Land*] received, though I say it, staggeringly good press notices – but that was all. No-one gave me a commission, or a grant, or a chatty interview, or another performance.

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<sup>23</sup> Herbert Hughes, “Girl Composer’s Triumph,” *The Daily Telegraph*, September 1, 1930.

It did not even seem strange at the time: it appeared that this was the composer's lot, and that writing music must be its own reward.<sup>24</sup>

In November of 1930, she had three songs published by Oxford University Press.<sup>25</sup> But other than a few songs, publishers seemed unwilling to consider anything else, as Maconchy noted: "Publishers would not consider seriously publishing anything by a young woman – except possibly some little songs."<sup>26</sup>

In 1932, Maconchy was diagnosed with tuberculosis, and was advised by her doctor to go to Switzerland. She refused, and settled in Kent instead. According to Anne Macnaghten, in Kent, "...the fresh air and her own determination eventually cured her, but from then on it meant a complete withdrawal from the musical life of London and this caused a serious interruption of her career."<sup>27</sup> Despite her struggling health, Maconchy continued to work with an unrelenting, industrious spirit, and her prolific musical output during this period is remarkable for someone in uncertain health. In March of 1933, she received third prize in a competition sponsored by *The Daily Telegraph* for her Oboe Quintet.<sup>28</sup> Her works were performed with some regularity as part of the Macnaghten-Lemare concert series, including the première of her First String Quartet at the Mercury

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<sup>24</sup> Maconchy, "A Composer Speaks," 25.

<sup>25</sup> Doctor, "Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams," 98.

<sup>26</sup> Maconchy, "A Composer Speaks," 25.

<sup>27</sup> Macnaghten, 298.

<sup>28</sup> See Doctor, "Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams," 96; and Macnaghten, 298.

Theatre in May of 1933<sup>29</sup> and the première of her ballet “Great Agrippa” in February of 1935. Her works were also performed at festivals of the International Society for Contemporary Music (I.S.C.M.), which included the première of her *Prelude, Interlude, and Fugue for Two Violins* in Prague in 1935, and String Quartet No. 2 in Paris the following year. Most of the performances of her works during this period were also broadcast over the B.B.C., and her Oboe Quintet was recorded for HMV. In 1937, she received a further honor, as an entire concert of her music was given in Warsaw. By the late 1930s, however, musical fashions were becoming more conservative in Britain, and Maconchy’s music, often characterized as “abrasive,” seemed less welcome.

In 1939, Maconchy returned to Ireland, where she gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth Anna, in Dublin. Maconchy and her daughter returned to England the following year. In 1941, Maconchy and her husband were forced to evacuate their cottage in Kent due to wartime dislocations, relocating to Shropshire. During this turbulent time, both Maconchy’s mother and younger sister were living in Switzerland, as her sister developed tuberculosis as well. Tragically, they both died during the war.<sup>30</sup> While Maconchy continued to compose, her music received few performances, aside from a production of her ballet *Puck Fair*, which was performed in Dublin by the Irish Ballet Club on February 9, 1941. A concert suite of the ballet was scheduled for

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<sup>29</sup> Elizabeth Maconchy, “Elizabeth Maconchy On Writing String Quartets,” program notes, Unicorn-Kanchana, CD DKP 9080, 1989.

<sup>30</sup> LeFanu, 3.

performance at the Proms on August 5, 1944. The concert was cancelled, however, due to frequent bombings of London.<sup>31</sup>

### Postwar years

Maconchy's life was fraught and unhappy in the years immediately following the war. Her cottage in Kent had been destroyed. Maconchy and LeFanu subsequently relocated to Essex, where Maconchy remained for the rest of her life.<sup>32</sup> In 1947, she gave birth to a second child, Nicola, who would later go on to become a distinguished composer in her own right. Maconchy's compositional output remained steady during this period. She completed her fifth and sixth string quartets (1948 and 1950, respectively); a work for string orchestra entitled *Nocturne* (1950-1); *Concertino for Bassoon and String Orchestra* (1952); and *Symphony for Double String Orchestra* (1953). While her musical output was substantial, this was also a trying time for Maconchy, as Nicola LeFanu notes:

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 other 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

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<sup>31</sup> See BBC Prom archive:  
[http://www.bbc.co.uk/proms/archive/search/event.shtml?id=6964&all=1&tab=search&sub\\_tab=composer](http://www.bbc.co.uk/proms/archive/search/event.shtml?id=6964&all=1&tab=search&sub_tab=composer)  
(accessed June 1, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> LeFanu, 3.

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’.<sup>33</sup>

Despite these challenges, Maconchy received the Edwin Evans prize for String Quartet No. 5 (1948), and her overture *Proud Thames* (1952-1953) received the London County Council Prize for a coronation overture.<sup>34</sup> In February and March of 1955, the B.B.C. devoted a series of concerts to Maconchy’s six string quartets. While this seemed a sure sign of success, she encountered great difficulty in securing a performance for her next work, String Quartet No. 7 (1955), which did not receive a performance until January of 1958.<sup>35</sup>

After String Quartet No. 7, Maconchy experienced a compositional block, and, as noted above, turned to a new genre, that of opera. She composed three operas in five years: *The Sofa* (1956-1957), *The Three Strangers* (1957-1958), and *The Departure* (1960-1961).<sup>36</sup> What followed was a succession of vocal works for amateurs: *Samson and the Gates of Gaza* (1963-1964), *The Birds* (1967-1968), *Johnny and the Mohawks* (1969), *The Jesse Tree* (1970), *The King of the Golden River* (1975), the cantata *Héloïse*

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<sup>33</sup> LeFanu “Elizabeth Maconchy DBE (1907-1994): some biographical and musical notes by her daughter Nicola LeFanu, Part 2,” 1.

<sup>34</sup> See LeFanu, Part 2, 1; and Doctor, “Maconchy, Elizabeth Violet,” in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 972.

<sup>35</sup> For further discussion, see Jennifer Doctor, “Maconchy’s String Quartet No. 7 and the BBC,” *Musical objects: a postgraduate review* 1 (1995): 5-8.

<sup>36</sup> There are some discrepancies regarding which opera Maconchy began first. While a majority of resources I examined list *The Sofa* as Maconchy’s first opera, Maconchy herself has remarked that she began work on *The Three Strangers* prior to *The Sofa*. In her interview with John Skiba, Maconchy remarks, “...the first I wrote was *The Three Strangers* to a Hardy libretto, which didn’t get performed for a long time...” 9.

*and Abelard* (1976-8), as well as numerous choral works, most notably *The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo* (1978).

While Maconchy composed primarily vocal works during the early 1960s, she returned to chamber music later in the decade, writing String Quartet No. 8 in 1967. This was soon followed by String Quartet No. 9 (1968), String Quartet No. 10 (1971-1972), String Quartet No. 11 (1976), String Quartet No. 12 (1979), and, finally, String Quartet No. 13, known as “Quartetto Corto” (1984). Other notable works include a score for cello and string ensemble entitled *Epyllion* (1973), *Romanza for Solo Viola and Orchestra* (1979), and *Music for Strings* (1981-1982), which was commissioned by the Proms.

Though Maconchy never taught, she did take an active role in the Composers’ Guild of Great Britain, serving as their first female chairman in 1959. After the death of Benjamin Britten in 1976, Maconchy took over his role as president of the Society for the Promotion of New Music. She was also elected an honorary fellow at St. Hilda’s College, Oxford, where her manuscripts are currently archived. In 1977, she was awarded the title of CBE, and was created a Dame of the British Empire in 1987. Maconchy died on November 11, 1994, at St. Clements Nursing Home, Norwich.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Doctor, “Maconchy, Elizabeth Violet,” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, 971.

## CHAPTER TWO

### The Political Landscape of Music in Britain

In order to arrive at a full understanding of Maconchy's music and its reception, the political landscape of music in Britain must be investigated fully. Why did the pre-war years prove to be more favorable for Maconchy, as contrasted with the comparatively indifferent reception accorded to her music during the war and after? While gender discrimination is often cited as the primary reason for this neglect, this supposition does not satisfactorily account for her marked early success. There is no doubt that Maconchy was discriminated against on the basis of her gender, as were many of her women peers, such as Grace Williams and Phyllis Tate. However, the nature of her reception both during and after the war requires that one look beyond the strict binaries of gender in order to understand not only the complexities of gender politics in the British musical establishment of the last century, but also how the changing political climate came to greatly affect the marketability of her music.

#### Women composing

Reflecting upon her years as a student at the R.C.M., Maconchy remarked in 1985, "...at the college there was no prejudice against the girls or women, one was completely equal."<sup>1</sup> Maconchy was fortunate in the sense that certain members of the composition faculty at the R.C.M., especially Vaughan Williams and Gustav Holst, were

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<sup>1</sup> *Elizabeth Maconchy*, documentary. Transcription by author.



willing to take on women pupils, encourage them, and treat them as equals. This environment was certainly a far cry from the experiences of women composers of the previous generation: Charles Villiers Stanford only taught a handful of women during his long career at the R.C.M., and mostly under duress. But although women were technically allowed to study composition, admission did not summarily lead to the establishment of an egalitarian environment. While a basic level of musical competence was considered an acceptable part of the education of young women over the course of the nineteenth century in Britain, by no means was it to be considered a legitimate subject for serious scholarly pursuit.<sup>2</sup> The foundations for this attitude were tied to the widespread belief that women were both intellectually and physically inferior to their male counterparts. Furthermore, socially constructed notions of femininity, which assigned women the role of “angel of the house,” fortified the conviction that women required a different type of education from men in order to properly prepare them for their domestic lives.<sup>3</sup> Even early reformers of women’s education looked upon music as a trivial pursuit, arguing that too much time devoted to the study of music left too little for the study of more serious academic subjects, as Jill Halstead notes:

Proficiency on musical instruments enabled women to enhance their ‘femininity’ by using their skill to entertain and charm suitors, husbands and family...the study of music was not a liberating or life-enhancing part of education; it served, rather, as a hobby to amuse – in fact diverting women from any ‘serious’ study which would put them in direct competition with men. With only rare exceptions,

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<sup>2</sup> Jill Halstead, *The Woman Composer: Creativity and the Gendered Politics of Musical Composition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 102.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

women received no serious or rigorously theoretical training in music until the first part of the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup>

With the proliferation of music conservatories over the course of the nineteenth century, women were able to gain access to music education in large numbers. Initially, however, women were only allowed to study piano or vocal performance, and were barred from studying composition. Within the conservatories themselves, there was an abundance of concern over the impact a co-ed student population might have on the integrity of the scholastic environment. Accordingly, in an effort to uphold standards and moral decency, as well as mitigate the possibility of indiscretions that might arise as the result of the mingling of sexes, male and female students were segregated.<sup>5</sup>

At Trinity College of Music, preventative steps lead to the creation of separate courses for female students, a move which the college proudly advertised: “Each student receives individual instruction and separate classes are formed for Ladies in all subjects.”<sup>6</sup> While women had been allowed to enroll in co-ed courses at the R.C.M. in the late nineteenth century, they were strictly segregated outside of the classroom, and each respective sex had their own entrance and separate staircase:

It was generally considered that while the sexes might receive instruction together in the classrooms, and must therefore necessarily walk along the same corridors to reach them, propriety of conduct would be preserved by male and female pupils entering the College by separate doors and ascending to the third floor by separate

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>6</sup> “Front matter,” *The Musical Times and Singing Class Circular* 22, no. 455 (January 1, 1881): 8. Also quoted in Halstead, 103.

staircases. After that they might safely be allowed to reach the tower rooms by the same staircase.<sup>7</sup>

By the late 1920s, women accounted for nearly half of the student population at the R.C.M. Still, the majority remained confined to the more socially acceptable areas of musical study for women: vocal and instrumental study. In composition, women remained in the minority.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to state that things had not changed significantly over the course of five decades, as is evident from H.C. Colles's 1933 of the R.C.M.'s first fifty years:

Sir George Grove, were he to enter the College to-day, would be surprised by its multifarious activities, perhaps be a little shocked by the freedom of its manners. He would find male and female pupils running indiscriminately up and down both staircases, and receptacles for cigarette ends, not always as carefully used as they might be, placed in the embrasures of the windows. He would find that the present Lady Superintendent does not, like her predecessor, spend time in sitting through lessons or peering in at the glass doors, and makes no attempt to break up little groups of boys and girls who chat in the corridors as they wait to enter the classrooms. She does not think that necessary, and, besides, both boys and girls keep her busy with their appeals for her help in all their personal concerns.<sup>9</sup>

While Maconchy may have encountered a relatively high level of equality while at the R.C.M., outside of the college, she found her prospects to be much more grim as she struggled to find publishers: "They would have liked some pretty little thing – I don't mean a pretty little person – not steady, serious music. Leslie Boosey was the worst. Herbert Hughes (who read for Booseys) was frightfully keen to publish some songs and a

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<sup>7</sup> H.C. Colles, *The Royal College of Music: A Jubilee Record 1883-1933* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1933), 26. Also, see Halstead 108-109.

<sup>8</sup> Halstead, 109.

<sup>9</sup> Colles, 51. See also Halstead, 109.

string quartet...and all Boosey would say was that he couldn't take anything except little songs from a woman."<sup>10</sup>

Bias against women composers was not just relegated to discussion behind closed doors in the publishing houses, but played out in public forums, in the form of music reviews. In some instances, one need not look further than the title of a review. An early review of Maconchy's orchestral suite *The Land*, proclaimed: "Girl Composer's Triumph."<sup>11</sup> While an otherwise glowing review, this piece of journalism testifies to the rarity of women composers in general, as well as the clumsiness with which the music of women was treated when it did appear:

Not only is this one of the best pieces of orchestral music written by any woman in recent years, but by far the most important and interesting work produced, so far, at the Promenade Concerts during the present season...Modern it is, of course, in the plain meaning of that word; the method direct, terse, economical; the harmony at times acid and biting – never luxurious or sentimental or (in the pre-war sense) feminine.<sup>12</sup>

According to Hughes's review, the success of *The Land* lay in its rejection of feminine excess and a solitary embrace of more masculine tendencies, earning this "girl" (who was twenty-three at the time of the première) a place among the "boys." But what this review also highlights is something much more significant: the boundaries of acceptable limits set around women composers. As Lucy Green has observed, there are several cases in which women composers' works were noted as extraordinary achievements. Yet they are praised specifically for one achievement: the ability to harness masterfully masculine

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<sup>10</sup> Hugo Cole, "Why can't a woman? Hugo Cole meets composer Elizabeth Maconchy, 70 today," *The Guardian*, March 19, 1977.

<sup>12</sup> Hughes, "Girl Composer's Triumph."

traits.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the most notable example would be the case of English composer Dame Ethel Smyth. Often praised for the “masculine energy” in her music, such commendation by the press was never enough to enable her to achieve equal standing among her male contemporaries. Instead, she was often portrayed as more of a caricature than composer.<sup>14</sup> As composer Rhian Samuel (b. 1944) remarks, “I have always been aware of women composers. [...] Not that they were considered normal; they were considered absolute freaks, but they did exist.”<sup>15</sup>

Green has opined, “It has been increasingly the case during the twentieth century that many of the most successful women composers in the classical field have reported discrimination less vociferously than their foremothers.”<sup>16</sup> This progression was certainly true for Maconchy. While she was well aware of gender discrimination and certainly struggled with it, she remained significantly less vocal than women composers a generation before her (Smyth, for instance), and many of her contemporaries. (An exception to Green’s assertion is Elisabeth Lutyens, who blamed her less than fully stellar career on discrimination.) In public, Maconchy employed a strategy of minimizing her gender. As she often asserted, “I have always said ‘I am a composer’ – one does not say a ‘man-composer’ so why say ‘a woman composer?’”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 100.

<sup>14</sup> Green, 101.

<sup>15</sup> Halstead, 145.

<sup>16</sup> Green, 104.

<sup>17</sup> Halstead, 160.

Despite the gendered language in reviews of Maconchy's music, they are, on the whole, largely favorable (or at least encouraging) in tone. Furthermore, none appear to characterize her in an overwhelmingly negative light, at least not until the late 1930s and early 1940s. In order to further understand the reception of Maconchy's music in relation to gender and politics, one also has to consider the vast changes taking place across England and the rest of Europe. And with the political and societal changes, the musical tides began to turn as well.

#### British Modernism and Nationalism

In 1935, reviews of Maconchy's music remained largely favorable. While some critics voiced skepticism in regards to her affinity for Bartók, who was considered dangerously "modern" in some circles, Maconchy was still viewed as a promising English composer. A review in *The Times*, while still critical of her modernist tendencies, nevertheless offered substantial praise, even comparing her to a young Henry Purcell:

Young players should play young composers, and Elizabeth Maconchy's Quartet was given a place of honour between Purcell and Brahms. She is still in the stage of conscious modernism oppressed by the duty of seeking discord and ensuing it. Possibly Purcell was in the same stage when he wrote the opening of his Fantasia in C minor and insisted overmuch on F sharps against F naturals and the like. She may outgrow it as well as he. Her ideas are definite if crude, and sometimes when the harmonic obsession becomes ameliorated she can produce moments of unaffected beauty. The work was interesting for itself and for what may come of it.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> "Recitals of the Week," *The Times*, March 8, 1935.

Two further reviews in *The Times*, appearing in February and October of 1937, offer similar opinions. The first, from February 26, notes, “Elizabeth Maconchy’s Divertissement for 12 instruments sticks to its points, such as they are. The chief point of the first movement seemed to be the conjunction of major and minor thirds on which Henry Purcell said all that was worth saying nearly three centuries ago, and Schönberg has said the rest more recently.”<sup>19</sup> The second, appearing on October 15, observes, “A group of songs by Elizabeth Maconchy, standing between Purcell and Schubert, held their own successfully.”<sup>20</sup> A further allusion to Purcell appears in an article profiling Maconchy’s music in *The Monthly Musical Record*. In this essay, the distinguished critic Frank Howes remarks:

She is fond of oscillating intervals, major, minor and chromatic (in her first quartet the third is the chosen interval); critics have called attention to her affinity with Purcell in this respect, and the quality of astringency in general is common to the ancient and the modern composer.<sup>21</sup>

Aside from the above mentioned techniques that these critics deemed “Purcellian,” the comparisons are nevertheless significant. As the symbolic icon whose death marked the end of England’s musical “Golden Age,” Purcell was often apotheosized as the personification of musical “Englishness.”<sup>22</sup> As Hubert Parry attests in the *Oxford History of Music*, it was what he took to be Purcell’s inimitable style that

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<sup>19</sup> “Recitals of the Week,” *The Times*, February 26, 1937.

<sup>20</sup> “Recitals of the Week,” *The Times*, October 15, 1937.

<sup>21</sup> Frank Howes, “The Younger English Composers – III. Elizabeth Maconchy,” *The Monthly Musical Record* 68, no. 798 (July-August 1938): 168.

<sup>22</sup> Merion Hughes and Robert Stradling, *The English Musical Renaissance*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 45.

set him apart from the rest: “The style was too individual and uncompromising to appeal to foreigners.”<sup>23</sup> What was perceived as “unique” was Purcell’s use of chromaticism. In an article in *The Musical Times* in 1934 entitled “Some Observations on Purcell’s Harmony,” W. Gillies Whittaker opines that “Purcell carried chromaticism to a height previously unknown and rarely climbed in the next hundred years.”<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, Whittaker argues that Purcell exemplified “anti-resolution tendencies,” as the strict resolution of dissonance was not a matter of absolute necessity, and he remained “...indifferent to clashes which would have disturbed his successors.”<sup>25</sup> Whittaker goes on to further state:

...our Tudor Church music and madrigals are rich in examples of its [chromaticism] use, as unwary choristers know. In our day, Vaughan Williams has exploited it particularly in his ‘Fantasia on a Theme of Tallis’ and his unaccompanied Mass. Choral conductors endure endless trouble at rehearsals of the latter by reason of these unexpected progressions. To Purcell it was normal procedure. One could pick out hundreds of instances. I content myself with two from the Fantasias...a whole chain of them from a Sonata...and a bold and surprising one at the peak of an otherwise innocuous progression...Needless to say, in some of the ultra-chromatic movements they abound, producing a curious blend of archaism and modernity.<sup>26</sup>

Purcell was, in all senses of the word, a very “modern” composer in the eyes of the British. The valuation of Purcell’s momentous achievements were purposely

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<sup>23</sup> Quoted in *ibid.*, 37.

<sup>24</sup> W. Gillies Whittaker, “Some Observations on Purcell’s Harmony,” *The Musical Times* 75, no. 1100 (October 1934): 889.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 891.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 889.



misconstrued in order to establish a legacy of historical links to musical practices that could be viewed and described as distinctly English in nature and tradition:

He seemed to be reaching out beyond the possibilities of his day, to some scheme of things unhampered by the limitations of music of the period. It is not a question of an occasional experiment, an exceptional progression now and again, but of a habitual mode of speech, at times, no doubt, more arresting than at others, but rarely dropping into complacent commonplace... Like Bach, he incorporated into his style everything that he found satisfactory; when studying the men who came immediately before him one often says, 'How Purcellian!'<sup>27</sup>

Comparing a composer to Purcell (such as Vaughan Williams, in this example) provided a way of simultaneously affirming both elements of modernism (musically present in form of chromaticism and diatonicism) and "Englishness." Extending the comparison to Maconchy was to place her within a tradition at once "modern" and timelessly "English." Purcell provided these critics a way to rectify her use of, for example, octatonicism (absorbed from Bartók and Stravinsky), while simultaneously keeping her musical development within the realm of the British tradition.

While attitudes towards modern music remained largely favorable during the early 1930s, attitudes began to change towards the end of the decade. Doctor observes:

...by the end of the decade, there was a noticeable shift in attitude against avant-garde compositional styles in Britain, which particularly affected Maconchy's reputation. Her music became victim to the increasing antipathy, attributable to the unstable social and political conditions, towards musical idioms that were "ugly", "cerebral", "dissonant", and, basically, "un-British". Even the BBC, which had previously performed her works regularly, failed to carry out promised performances.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 893-894.

<sup>28</sup> Doctor, "'Working for her own Salvation': Vaughan Williams as teacher of Elizabeth Maconchy, Grace Williams, and Ina Boyle," 197.

Just as Doctor argues, the contrast in tone towards Maconchy's work is all the more startling when one compares reviews of her works in *The Times* between 1937 and 1938.<sup>29</sup> In February of 1937, a review of her second string quartet is received quite favorably:

The chief interest of Miss Lemare's second concert at the Mercury Theatre on Monday was the first performance by the Brosa Quartet of Elizabeth Maconchy's second string quartet. Miss Maconchy's first string quartet introduced her name to a wider audience, and its successor is likely to do the same... It is also likely to enhance her reputation, for it is a strong work... the work is satisfying because it combines emotional tension with intellectual interest in the evolution of the main theme.<sup>30</sup>

By 1938, however, reviews of Maconchy's music become increasingly harsh, with a music critic at *The Times* writing an especially scathing review of her Viola Sonata:

We came to the new work chiefly to discover whether that strident style which Elizabeth Maconchy's admirers call "austere" shows any signs of amelioration. The importance of ugliness is very well in a young student, but the programme told us that the composer is now past 30. It is time that all that earnest insistence on strong rhythms and harsh harmonies should begin to expand into a beauty of its own.<sup>31</sup>

While comprehensibility and value of contemporary British music had been a matter of heated debate throughout the 1920s and 1930s,<sup>32</sup> the changes in attitude towards a dissonant and "harsh" harmonic idiom was a result of the growing political unrest in

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<sup>29</sup> See Doctor, "Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams," 104.

<sup>30</sup> "Recitals of the Week," *The Times*, February 5, 1937.

<sup>31</sup> "Wigmore Hall – Hallis Chamber Concert," *The Times*, February 16, 1938. This is also quoted in Doctor's "Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams," 104.

<sup>32</sup> See Jenny Doctor, "Parataxis of British Musical Modernism," *The Musical Quarterly* 91, nos. 1-2 (Spring/Summer 2008): 89-115; and Jennifer Doctor, *The BBC and Ultra-Modern Music, 1922-1936* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

Europe. With a dramatic increase of foreigners immigrating to England, the British became increasingly concerned over the impact that these “outsiders” would have on society. As Doctor observes, this growing apprehension resulted in “...a public response in which British qualities were defined and favored at the expense of characteristics that seemed ‘un-British.’”<sup>33</sup>

Despite this general change in attitude towards Maconchy’s music, there were still critics who favorably reviewed her works, with the most notable being Frank Howes. In the previously quoted excerpt from Howes’s article on Maconchy in *The Monthly Musical Record*, he argues in favor of Maconchy’s treatment of dissonance. The resulting “astringency,” he suggests, is not strictly foreign in nature, but rather an extension of a native musical style.<sup>34</sup>

Concerns over “modern music” in general, however, continued to be debated. An article appearing in *The Times* retells a discussion that took place on the topic of modern music at the “Music and Life Congress” at Queen Mary Hall, Bloomsbury in May of 1938.<sup>35</sup> Entitled “Public Attitude to Modernism, A Fearsome Harmonium,” the title aptly captures the heated tone of the debates. Discussions on the first day, of which several composers took part, including Maconchy, covered the topics of what exactly constitutes

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<sup>33</sup> Doctor, “Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams” 104.

<sup>34</sup> See Howes, “The Younger English Composers – III. Elizabeth Maconchy,” 168.

<sup>35</sup> Doctor briefly discusses the “Music and Life Congress,” organized by Edward Clark, in “Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams,” 102.

music as “modern,” as well as marking distinctions between “modern” and “contemporary”:

What constituted contemporary music was discussed at the following session to which half a dozen of our younger composers contributed. Opinion was divided whether it should be defined technically by the dethronement of tonality, as was proposed by Mr. Alan Bush, or whether it was a question not so much of method as of spirit. Professor Wellesz urged that the word “modern” should be used for technical innovations and “contemporary” kept for works produced by modern social conditions...Miss Elizabeth Maconchy, who came out bravely on the side of pure reason, explained modernism in purely musical terms of counterpoint: modern music is logical, contrapuntal, a kind of impassioned dialogue. Until Mr. Humphrey Searle mentioned it the word “evolution” had not been used in the discussion, and in a subsequent paper on Hindemith’s system of harmony Mr. Franz Reizenstein flung the idea back in his face.

The end of the article provides the most damning piece of evidence, highlighting the changing attitudes toward music and culture in 1938:

Definite conclusions were not to be expected, but the ground was cleared and order discovered in the welter of modern tendencies. The great defect in current ideas, as reflected by this congress, is its disregard of evolution. The greatest philosophical discovery of the nineteenth century is no doubt out of fashion, though there was no disposition to deny the organic character of works of art; perhaps revolutions rather than evolution are preferred in music as in life in 1938.<sup>36</sup>

### The war and early post-war years

Both during and immediately after the war, Maconchy encountered great difficulties in securing performances of her works.<sup>37</sup> During the war, as the B.B.C. was reduced to a single airwave, programmers focused on the broadcasting of music with a

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<sup>36</sup> Doctor, “Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams,” 104.

<sup>37</sup> Doctor, “‘Working for her own Salvation’: Vaughan Williams as teacher of Elizabeth Maconchy, Grace Williams, and Ina Boyle,” 197-198.

wide and general appeal. As Doctor observes, "...conditions that essentially banned Maconchy from the wartime airwaves opened the BBC gates to Williams's more traditional and accessible style – even in the early months of the war, when program content was most strictly controlled."<sup>38</sup>

Both Grace Williams and Vaughan Williams took it upon themselves to lobby for Maconchy's music during this period. In 1944, Vaughan Williams urged the B.B.C. to consider another performance of *The Land*. This attempt came to no avail, as Vaughan Williams wrote in a letter to Maconchy on February 18, 1944:

Now about you – I do feel it very bad that you do not get your stuff done – Have you anything *new* you could send in to the proms? If so let me know *at once* & I will write to H.J.W. at the same time as about Rooper – I have tried to persuade B.B.C. to do the Land again – but as usual they hedged.

I fear we must confess that you are *not popular* – I know though theoretically that is a very noble aspiration practically, it is galling.

But dearest Betty, you are still young – I was about 30 before I ever heard even a *song* of mine done in public – so your time may come – so push on and one day perhaps the key will turn in the lock.<sup>39</sup>

Maconchy must have responded, as Vaughan Williams wrote to Henry Wood in a letter dated February 25, 1944:

You will hate me for worrying you – but I have just heard that another ex-pupil Elizabeth Maconchy has sent in a work for the Proms 'Puck Fair'. I do not know the work, but from what I *do* know of her I think it ought to be worth consideration.

Could you find time to glance at it & see if it is likely to suit you?  
*Do not answer this please.*<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Doctor, "Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams," 105.

<sup>39</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams to Elizabeth Maconchy, February 18, 1944, in *Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams 1895-1958*, 369.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 370.

On the letter itself, Wood wrote, “Already seen & included,” and *Puck Fair* was scheduled for performance at the Proms in August.<sup>41</sup> As Doctor’s research has shown, Grace Williams also sought to help her friend during the war and campaigned more for Maconchy’s music than she did for her own. In her correspondence with the B.B.C., Williams wrote, “Is there any chance of hearing one of Elizabeth Maconchy’s works in your series? The neglect of her music (apart from occasional broadcasts of the quartets) is quite heartbreaking.”<sup>42</sup>

After the war, conditions slowly began to improve for Maconchy as the more conservative tonal idioms that were popular during the war went rapidly out of style. Additionally, venues and organizations such as the Contemporary Music Centre, and the newly formed Society for the Promotion of New Music (SPNM) provided more opportunities for the performances of contemporary works. Another circumstance was the creation of B.B.C.’s Third Programme, which began broadcasting in 1946. In 1947, as part of an effort to promote new music, they ran a year-long series entitled *Contemporary British Composers*, featuring Maconchy in one of the segments.

Another change was the reception to Maconchy’s music in the press. Her “astringent” style, unwelcome during the war, was once again being perceived as distinctly English. Her Fourth String Quartet, composed in 1942-1943 and premiered in

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<sup>41</sup> Indicated in Cobbe’s footnote, 370. As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Proms concert was later cancelled due to the frequent bombings of London.

<sup>42</sup> Doctor, “Intersecting Circles: The Early Careers of Elizabeth Maconchy, Elisabeth Lutyens, and Grace Williams,” 106.

1947, garnered continuous marks of high praise in the press, with one critic in *The Times* remarking:

It was right to include a work of modern idiom in a programme devoted in the main to English music. For Miss Maconchy has always been a thinker in music who can express herself in terse modern terms and engender from her compact argument an impassioned conviction. This she does once more in her fourth quartet...and within its brief space the quartet develops an eloquence charged with a characteristic astringency. This quality and its monothematic structure bring the quartet within the tradition of English chamber music to which Purcell belongs.<sup>43</sup>

Another review in *The Times* of the same quartet, performed at a concert given at the Contemporary Music Centre in November of 1948, makes similar allusions, linking Maconchy's compositional style to the likes of Weelkes and Holst:

The most completely satisfying work, therefore, was Elizabeth Maconchy's fourth string quartet, a taut and concise disquisition evolved from a short melodic fragment. From her germ she causes to grow an organic movement logically satisfying and generating passion as it develops, which is, however, held within a disciplined restraint by its own astringency. This astringent flavour recurs intermittently in English music from Weelkes onward. It appeared last in Holst, and is also an element in Rawsthorne as well as Maconchy.<sup>44</sup>

While Maconchy's music had been seldom programmed during the war, the late 1940s proved to be a marginally fruitful period. In June of 1949, yet another favorable review of String Quartet No. 4 appears, this time in *The Birmingham Post*. Filled with notes of praise, the critic here is puzzled at the neglect of Maconchy's music, which, by pointed comparisons to Bartók and Bloch, he (or she) finds unaccountable:

I cannot believe that there is any other modern British quartet writing in the class of Miss Maconchy's (little advertisement though she gets); nor any from abroad save by Bartók and by Bloch. She has powerful invention, masterly logic and

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<sup>43</sup> "B.B.C. Chamber Concert – New String Quartet," *The Times*, January 21, 1947.

<sup>44</sup> "Contemporary Music Centre – New Quartets," *The Times*, November 10, 1948.

concentration, and a burning passion – albeit a passion of intellect rather than of the nerves. That third movement, where the well-worn device of clashing major and minor thirds is turned to an entirely new eloquence would be enough in itself to establish her eminence.<sup>45</sup>

Despite the success of her Fourth and Fifth String Quartet (the latter was awarded the Edwin Evans prize in 1948) and the acclaim that greeted her coronation overture *Proud Thames*, as well as widespread favorable reviews in the press, by the mid-1950s Maconchy still struggled to secure performances of her works. Nowhere is this struggle more apparent than in Jennifer Doctor's brilliant article "Maconchy's String Quartet No. 7 and the BBC" (1995), which highlights the three years the B.B.C. spent rescheduling and delaying the première of the quartet. Doctor remarks:

The story of the first performance of the Seventh String Quartet, composed in 1955, exemplifies the ambiguity of Maconchy's position as an established composer during this period. Although the BBC offered to present the première of this work soon after its completion, nearly three years passed before it was finally broadcast. The negotiations and delays that took place during the intervening months...demonstrate that despite Maconchy's achievements and the recognition she received as a respected British composer, in the years following the war she had to lobby persistently to ensure that her works received the attention they deserved.<sup>46</sup>

In a review of String Quartet No. 7, appearing in the January 23, 1958 issue of *The Listener*, Dyneley Hussey makes a particularly acute observation, suggesting that the lack of mainstream appeal has severely limited her ability to achieve the recognition that her music deserves:

Miss Maconchy's concentration upon chamber-music has prevented her from gaining the high place in general public estimation that is really her due. This

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<sup>45</sup> J.F.W., Music Review, *The Birmingham Post*, June 8, 1949.

<sup>46</sup> Doctor, "Maconchy's String Quartet No. 7 and the BBC," *Musical objects: a postgraduate review* 1 (1995): 6.



new quartet is yet another manifestation of her remarkable ability as a composer and her complete mastery of her chosen medium.<sup>47</sup>

The struggle to secure a performance of her Seventh String Quartet, coupled with the changing tides of musical tastes in Britain, must have taken a heavy toll on the composer. While there is no evidence to directly connect her musical block to either of these conditions, at the very least, this situation engendered a significant level of frustration. In order to overcome this compositional block, she turned to something new, remarking in an interview with Anne Macnaghten in 1966, "...about ten years ago I thought I'd got a bit stuck and I'd been writing the same sort of forms for too long. And I wanted to do something quite different. So I made a breakaway from chamber music and abstract music in general to operas."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Dyneley Hussey, "Music: For Five Strings and Four," *The Listener* 942 (January 23, 1958): 175.

<sup>48</sup> "Elizabeth Maconchy, Composer's Portrait," BBC Music Programme, June 15, 1966 (British Library Sound Archive, 1CDR0015998).

## CHAPTER THREE

### *The Sofa: Comic opera in one act*

Elizabeth Maconchy and Ursula Vaughan Williams began working on *The Sofa* in 1956. Whose idea it was to use Claude Prosper Jolyot de Crébillon's libidinous satirical pastiche of Arabian Nights, *Le Sopha, conte moral* (1792), is unclear.<sup>1</sup> The idea may have originated with Ralph Vaughan Williams, who was known to relish "naughty" French novels.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, it afforded Maconchy a welcome opportunity to expand her ideas as she worked with her librettist. While the opera is a tamer reinterpretation of Crébillon's tale, the opera retains, at its very core, the satirical spirit of the original. Maconchy's inventive score, while reflecting both thematic devices characteristic of her compositional style, evinces a more lyrical, comical side of her musical personality. This newfound lyricism brilliantly entwines with Ursula Vaughan Williams's suggestive libretto.

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<sup>1</sup> In her autobiography, *Paradise Remembered* (2002), Ursula Vaughan Williams remarks that the idea to use Crébillon's novel came from William LeFanu (188). Her brief remark is the only statement I have been able to locate which directly indicates who the idea originated with. In my conversation with Nicola LeFanu, she suggested that the idea may have originated with Ralph Vaughan Williams, as *Le Sopha* was far removed from William LeFanu's literary interests. As Ursula Vaughan Williams's autobiography (which was completed well after a stroke) contains many inaccuracies with regards to years and dates, I am inclined to believe, based on Ralph Vaughan Williams's close involvement with the opera, that the idea originated with him.

<sup>2</sup> Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 58.

The Sofa: an extravaganza

The opera is set in the anteroom to a ballroom in 1860s Paris where Dominic, a rakish young Prince, is hosting a ball. The opera opens with a jubilant, short and succinct recurrent musical figure built upon the notes B-flat, C, D, and E-flat, in the woodwinds, followed by an expansion of the figure into an extended melodic phrase built upon major and minor seconds (Example 1, Motive A).

Example 1: *The Sofa*, mm. 1-9 (Motive A).

The image displays a musical score for four woodwind instruments: Piccolo (Pic.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The score is divided into two systems. The first system (measures 1-4) shows the initial entry of Motive A, characterized by a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes and a specific melodic contour. The second system (measures 5-9) shows the expansion of this motive into a more complex melodic phrase, featuring a series of major and minor seconds. Dynamics such as *f*, *mf*, and *p* are indicated throughout the score.

Seated on a sofa in the anteroom is Monique, the object of Dominic's dissolute intentions. As the woodwinds continue playful exchanges of Motive A back and forth, Dominic, confident in his powers to charm, prematurely declares his victory with the triumphant declaration, "Ah, my sweet consolation!" (mm. 10-23)

Unwilling to satisfy Dominic’s desires immediately, Monique flirtatiously inquires as to why Dominic is in need of erotic “consolation.” This inquiry prompts Dominic to set forth his reasons in a playfully lighthearted strophic patter-song aria set in 5/8 (“Easy come, and easy go...”), in which he recounts the unfortunate nature of his situation. The melody of Dominic’s aria has a tonal center of F-natural, and primarily consists of the alternation of both major and minor seconds and thirds, with occasional intervallic leaps of a perfect fourth and octave (Example 2). The aria also constitutes the first musical allusion,<sup>3</sup> as the melodic line is highly reminiscent of a similar melodic phrase from the second movement of Mahler’s Fourth Symphony (Example 3).

Example 2: *The Sofa*, mm. 48-59.

The image shows a musical score for Example 2, mm. 48-59. It features six staves: a vocal line for Dominic and five instrumental staves for VI. I, VI. II, Vla., Vc., and Cb. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 5/8. The tempo/mood is 'Allegro con brio (bar)'. Dynamics include mp, p, and pp. The lyrics 'Easy come and ea' are visible in the vocal line.

<sup>3</sup> By allusion, I refer to J. Peter Burkholder’s definition in *Grove Music Online*: “A reference in a musical work to another work or to a style or convention, in a manner akin to an allusion in speech or literature, or the act of making such a reference. Allusion to a particular work is generally distinguished from quotation in that material is not quoted directly, but a reference is made through some other similarity between the two works, such as gesture, melodic or rhythmic contour, timbre, texture, or form.”

Example 2, continued.

Musical score for Example 2, continued. The score includes a vocal line for Dominic and instrumental parts for Violin I (VI. I), Violin II (VI. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The vocal line has lyrics: "— sy go, For mo — ney, drops like fall — ing rain, And when — the sun comes out". The instrumental parts are arranged in a standard orchestral format with five staves.

Musical score for Example 2, continued. The score includes a vocal line for Dominic and instrumental parts for Violin I (VI. I), Violin II (VI. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The vocal line has lyrics: "— a gain it's gone — and what do not know!". The instrumental parts are arranged in a standard orchestral format with five staves.

Example 3: Mahler, Symphony No. 4, II, rehearsal 8.

Musical score for Example 3: Mahler, Symphony No. 4, II, rehearsal 8. The score shows the first and second violins (labeled 1. VI. and 2. VI.) and the viola (Vla.). The score includes dynamic markings such as *pizz.*, *arco*, *pp*, *ppp*, and *dim.*. The notation is complex, featuring many slurs and ties.

Dominic’s lighthearted avowal then takes on a more somber hue as he laments a most unfortunate impediment: his Grandmother is a witch. With his cheerfulness now marred by thoughts of his Grandmother, the curiously chimerical short melodic flourish of Motive A reappears in the woodwinds (mm. 88-94). Desirous to claim his prize, Dominic returns to seducing Monique. He begins by complementing “the flutter of her wrist,” which is musically echoed by a trill in the clarinet (m. 123). Monique mockingly responds, imitating his melody, which effectively forms a canon (mm. 131-183).

As their playful exchange swells and grows more harmonious, a new motive is introduced (Example 4, Motive B). Here, Maconchy alludes to another score, as the material for Motive B has a distinct resemblance to the open melody of the first movement of Prokofiev’s Second Violin Concerto (Example 5).

Example 4: *The Sofa*, mm. 184-185 (Motive B).

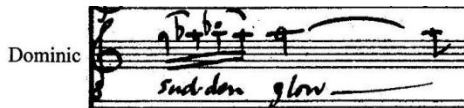
The image shows a musical score for four woodwind instruments: Piccolo (Pic.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), and Bassoon (Bn.). The score is divided into two measures, mm. 184 and 185. The Piccolo part features a trill in the first measure, marked with a forte (f) dynamic. The Oboe, Clarinet, and Bassoon parts all play a melodic line in the first measure, marked with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic. In the second measure, the Piccolo part continues with a trill, while the Oboe, Clarinet, and Bassoon parts play a more complex melodic line, marked with a mezzo-piano (mp) dynamic. The score is written in a 2/4 time signature and includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.

Example 5: Prokofiev, Violin Concerto No. 2, I, mm. 1-6.



As Dominic begins a short, but impassioned aria, a new gesture emerges (Example 6, Motive C), based on a typically octatonic alternation of whole and half steps, which quickly becomes more impassioned as Dominic and Monique exchange remarks.

Example 6: *The Sofa*, m. 190 (Motive C).



As their duet progresses, Motive B prominently reemerges in the woodwinds as Motive C grows stronger and more persistent in the strings (Example 7).

Example 7: *The Sofa*, mm.198-199.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Example 7, mm. 198-199. The score is written on multiple staves for various instruments and voices. The instruments listed are Piccolo (Pic.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bn.), Horn (Hn.), Trumpet (Tpt.), Vibraphone (Vib.), Harp (Hp.), Dominica, Monique, Violin I (VI. I), Violin II (VI. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The music is in 4/4 time and features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes. Dynamics range from piano (pp) to fortissimo (ff). A 'Tana Drum over' is indicated in the Vibraphone part. The vocal parts for Dominica and Monique have lyrics: 'seas of night', 'so', 'love', 'is', 'de'.

On the cusp of coitus, the lovers' joy is abruptly interrupted, as the persistent repetition of Motive B announces the brusque entrance of Dominic's Grandmother (Example 8). Startled, Monique hurriedly exits the anteroom.



Example 8: *The Sofa*, mm. 202-203.

*Maestoso* (♩ = c60)

Pic.

Ob.

Cl.

Bn.

Hn.

Tpt.

BD.

Hp.

Grandmother

*Maestoso* (♩ = c60)

[The Grandmother appears. She takes  
a comb from her night table, drops it against  
her slaps forward, wraps on the floor under her skirt.]

*Maestoso* (♩ = c60) Full Band

VI. I

VI. II

Vla.

Vc.

Cb.

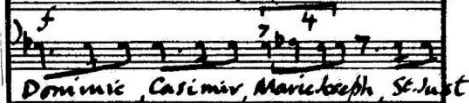
Wack

Dom-i-nic!

Furious with Dominic's philandering, which is most unseemly for a prince, the Grandmother launches into an impassioned declaration, built upon the robust rhythm that marked her dramatic entrance (Example 9).

Example 9: *The Sofa*, m. 205.

Grandmother



Dominic, Casimir, Maricelaph, St. Just

Determined to teach her grandson a lesson, she casts a spell, turning him into a sofa until the act of “love’s consummation” takes place upon him, at which point the spell will be broken, and he will be able to return to his mortal form.

Summoning all her enchantments, she enters into a fiery aria emblazoned with a coloratura passage (Example 10) that patently alludes to the famous Queen of the Night aria, “Der Hölle Rache kocht in meinem Herzen,” from Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* (Example 11).

Example 10: *The Sofa*, mm. 285-293.

Grandmother



My ma

sic aut. shall set a part

This night from

all his span

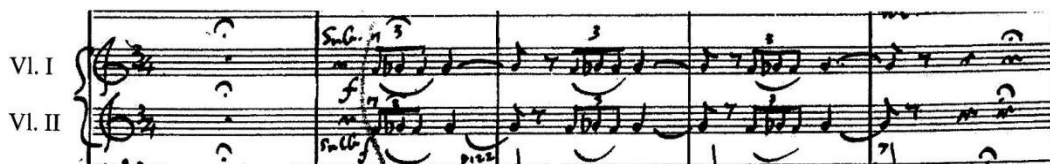
Example 11: Excerpt from “Der Hölle Rache in meinem Herzen,” *Die Zauberflöte*.



With a clap of thunder, the spell is cast, followed by a stage blackout (m. 315).

When the lights go back up, a sofa appears, the upholstery of which resembles the clothes that Dominic was wearing when the spell was cast. As the music resumes, a short rhythmic gesture based upon oscillating minor seconds appears in the first and second violins (Example 12). Maconchy uses this theme to make a transition into a leisurely waltz, eventually expanding the figure into a short melodic theme played by solo ‘cello (Example 13, Motive D). This in turn serves as the primary melodic material for a trio sung by young ladies who have just entered the anteroom, in which they sing of their longings for love and romance.

Example 12: *The Sofa*, mm. 326-330.



Example 13: *The Sofa*, mm.340-344 (Motive D).



The ladies’ attention is quickly diverted, by the arrival of three young men. Two of the boys inquire if Yolande and Laura would like to dance, and lead them to the ballroom,

leaving Lucille alone with the remaining young gentleman, who is one of her suitors. As the suitor expresses his ardent feelings, Motive C slyly returns as they both express their ardor for one another (Example 14).

Example 14: *The Sofa*, mm. 466-471.

The musical score for Example 14, mm. 466-471, from *The Sofa*, is presented in a standard orchestral layout. The instruments and parts included are:

- Pic. (Piccolo)
- Ob. (Oboe)
- Cl. (Clarinet)
- Bn. (Bassoon)
- Hn. (Horn)
- Tpt. (Trumpet)
- Hp. (Harp)
- Suitor (with lyrics: "Can you answer yet to my question? Notice little little stars")
- VI. I (Violin I)
- VI. II (Violin II)
- Vla. (Viola)
- Vc. (Violoncello)
- Cb. (Contrabass)

The score is written in 4/4 time and features a key signature of one flat (B-flat). The Suitor's part includes the lyrics: "Can you answer yet to my question? Notice little little stars". The score is marked with dynamics such as *p* (piano) and *pp* (pianissimo), and includes performance instructions like *pppp* and *arco*. The music is characterized by a melodic line in the Suitor's part and a complex, rhythmic accompaniment in the woodwinds and strings.

Convinced that the young couple will free him from his predicament at last, the voice of Dominic – that is, the voice of the sofa – sings “So far, so good” (mm. 494-499).<sup>4</sup> His hopes are quickly dashed as it becomes all too clear that the suitor’s intentions are strictly honorable: he asks for Lucille’s hand in marriage. Enraged, the voice of Dominic sings of his angry, bitter disappointment; this outburst is predicated upon Motive C (m. 551).

As Lucille and her suitor exit, Dominic’s aria comes to a close. A polka then quickly fills the anteroom as a group of guests enter from the adjoining ballroom with the young ladies singing a short, lighthearted laughing chorus. Here, both the opening of the polka, and the beginning of a brief laughing chorus (Examples 15 and 16) are reminiscent of Johann Strauss, Jr.’s “Tritsch Tratsch Polka” (Example 17).

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<sup>4</sup> The singer is presumably in the wings or in the orchestra pit. An early draft of the synopsis indicates, “A small microphone is attached under the head of the Sofa, and through this the voice of the Prince is heard later.” Undated synopsis of *The Sofa*, Elizabeth Maconchy Archive, St. Hilda’s College, Oxford.

Example 15: *The Sofa*, mm. 593-596.

Pic.  
Ob.  
Cl.  
Bn.  
Hn.

Example 16: *The Sofa*, mm. 606-612.

Soprano  
Alto

Soprano  
Alto

Example 17: Opening of Johann Strauss, Jr.'s "Tritsch Tratsch Polka."

**Polka**

The musical score is arranged in systems, with each instrument or section listed on the left. The instruments and sections are:

- Kleine Flöte
- Große Flöte
- 1. u. 2. Oboe
- 1. Klarinette in D
- 2. Klarinette in A
- 1. Fagott
- 2. Fagott
- 1. u. 2. Horn in F
- 3. u. 4. Horn in F
- 1. Trompete in F
- 2. Trompete in F
- Posaune und Baßtuba
- Pauken in A, E
- Triangel
- Kleine Trommel
- Große Trommel mit Becken
- 1. Violinen
- 2. Violinen
- Violen
- Violoncelli
- Kontrabässe

The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (f, p), articulations (tr, pizz.), and performance instructions (div.). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 2/4.

The chorus then enters into a series of lively canonic inquiries as to the location of their host. After the chorus contemplates the frivolous notion that Dominic had been turned into a bat, Dominic's voice is heard as he responds, "warmer" (mm. 725-727), alarming

the guests until their attention is diverted to more immediate pleasures. They then sing a “brindisi,” a drinking song in praise of champagne, which begins with the chorus doubling octaves (Example 18).

Example 18: *The Sofa*, mm. 756-761.

The image shows a musical score for four vocal parts: Soprano, Alto, Tenor, and Bass. The score is written on four staves. The lyrics are 'fair-champagne whose'. The Soprano part has a melodic line with notes and rests. The Alto part has a similar melodic line. The Tenor part has a melodic line with notes and rests. The Bass part has a melodic line with notes and rests. The lyrics are written below the staves. The score is in a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature. The music is in a 4-measure phrase. The Soprano part starts with a half note 'fair', followed by a quarter note 'cham', a quarter note 'pagne', and a half note 'whose'. The Alto part starts with a half note 'fair', followed by a quarter note 'cham', a quarter note 'pagne', and a half note 'whose'. The Tenor part starts with a half note 'fair', followed by a quarter note 'cham', a quarter note 'pagne', and a half note 'whose'. The Bass part starts with a half note 'fair', followed by a quarter note 'cham', a quarter note 'pagne', and a half note 'whose'. The lyrics are written below the staves.

The drinking chorus is followed by a return of the polka theme (m. 804), as the guests begin to filter out of the anteroom and back into the ballroom.

As the guests leave, the serially flirtatious Monique enters on the arm of a young Englishman named Edward with whom she has been previously acquainted. Edward inquires as to the nature of Monique and Dominic’s friendship. To avoid answering directly, she inquires after Edwards activities as of late. Edward commences a brief, rhythmic aria about his love of hunting (Example 19). The shape of the melodic line in the strings, woodwinds, and brass, followed by the explosive entrance of the horns, tenor drum, and bass drum, recall the scherzo of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (Example 20).



Example 19: *The Sofa*, mm. 890-897.

The image shows a handwritten musical score for Example 19, "The Sofa", measures 890-897. The score is arranged in a standard orchestral format with the following parts from top to bottom:

- Pic. (Piccolo)
- Ob. (Oboe)
- Cl. (Clarinet)
- Bn. (Bassoon)
- Hn. (Horn)
- Tpt. (Trumpet)
- Perc. (Percussion, marked *Xylo*)
- Hp. (Harp)
- Edward (with lyrics: *cannot and days to be thought to be - knows like around the phenomenon*)
- VI. I (Violin I)
- VI. II (Violin II)
- Vla. (Viola)
- Vc. (Violoncello)
- Cb. (Contrabass)

The score is written in a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a 3/4 time signature. It features various musical notations including dynamics (e.g., *f*, *mf*, *ff*), articulation (e.g., *arco*, *pp*), and performance instructions (e.g., *3*, *2*). The Edward part includes the lyrics: "cannot and days to be thought to be - knows like around the phenomenon".

Example 19, continued.

The musical score is arranged in a system with the following parts from top to bottom:

- Pic. (Piccolo)
- Ob. (Oboe)
- Cl. (Clarinet)
- Bn. (Bassoon)
- Hn. (Horn)
- Tpt. (Trumpet)
- Perc. (Percussion): Includes notation for T.D. (Tom Tom) and B.D. (Bass Drum).
- Hp. (Harp): Includes the instruction (G.D.) and a circled section.
- Edward (Vocal): Lyrics are "good day's bag" and "five".
- VI. I (Violin I)
- VI. II (Violin II)
- Vla. (Viola)
- Vc. (Violoncello)
- Cb. (Cello)

The score contains various musical notations including dynamics (e.g., *f*, *mf*), articulation (accents, slurs), and performance instructions. The percussion part includes specific drum notation for T.D. and B.D. The harp part features a circled section with a vertical line through it. The vocal line has lyrics written below the notes.

Example 20: Beethoven, Symphony No. 9, II, mm. 1-28.

**II**

Molto vivace. (♩. = 116.)

2 Flauti.

2 Oboi

2 Clarinetti in C.

2 Fagotti:

I. II in D  
4 Corni

III. IV in B

2 Trombe in D

Alto e Tenore  
Tromboni.  
Basso

Timpani in

Violino I.

Violino II.

Viola.

Violoncello  
e Contrabasso

Example 20, continued.

The image displays two systems of a musical score. The first system (measures 10-19) includes staves for Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Fg.), Cor. (D), 2. Violin (2.VI.), Viola (Vla.), and Violoncello (Vc.). The second system (measures 20-29) includes staves for Flute (Fl.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Fg.), Cor. (D), Cor. (B), Violin (Vl.), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The score features dynamic markings such as *pp* and *sempre pp*, and first endings marked with '1.'. The music is written in a key signature of one flat and a common time signature.

Quite bored by the dashing Englishman’s story of blood sport, Monique interrupts with the flirtatious remark that Edward “enjoys the chase.” Her meaning is made plain by the ensuing canonic imitation between the two voices. A sly caricature of a fox-hunting British officer, Edward is a little slow to understand Monique’s intention. Eventually, he finally comprehends Monique’s insinuation and Motive C again reappears. Now the two

embrace passionately, the lights dim, and “love’s act” finally takes place upon the sofa (mm. 994-1007).

After a streak of lightening and a roll of thunder, the lights are raised, revealing that the curse has been broken: the sofa has disappeared, and Dominic has regained his humanity. Furious at being bested in his pursuit of Monique, Dominic angrily confronts Edward, and the two hurl insults back and forth, as the flourish of Motive A returns in the woodwinds. Attracted by all the commotion, the guests have already re-entered the anteroom (m. 1023). Edward then proceeds to accuse Dominic of actually being the sofa, and Dominic responds by calling Edward a madman, and calls for his footmen to have him ejected from the hall. The curious guests follow Edward and the footmen, leaving Monique and Dominic alone.

Meanwhile, the sofa has miraculously reappeared. After Dominic locks the door, he leads Monique to the sofa, and they resume their lovemaking. After the lush harmonies of their duet lead to their declaration of “love’s delights,” the music swells with a feverishly agitated reiteration of Motive C, which swiftly brings down the curtain (Example 21).

Example 21: *The Sofa*, mm. 1250-1253.

The musical score is arranged in a standard orchestral layout. The instruments listed on the left are Piccolo (Pic.), Oboe (Ob.), Clarinet (Cl.), Bassoon (Bn.), Horn (Hn.), Trumpet (Tpt.), Percussion (Perc.), Harp (Hp.), Violin I (VI. I), Violin II (VI. II), Viola (Vla.), Violoncello (Vc.), and Contrabass (Cb.). The score is divided into four measures. The first measure is marked *Presto*. The second measure contains the instruction *T.D.* (Tutti Drum). The third measure features a *Curtain* effect, indicated by a thick horizontal line across the strings. The fourth measure is marked *f* (forte). The percussion part includes a snare drum pattern in the first measure and a cymbal pattern in the second measure. The string parts are highly active, with many notes and slurs. The woodwinds and brass parts also have complex rhythmic patterns. The overall texture is dense and rhythmic.

### Constructing *The Sofa*

Maconchy's music for *The Sofa* reflects her compositional style as it was established by the 1950s. She constructs her opera from a series of short melodic and rhythmic themes, extended and varied by chromatic alteration and inversion. The counterpoint is structured through the canonic reiteration of the thematic material, which is primarily predicated upon major and minor seconds and thirds.<sup>5</sup> A unique feature of *The Sofa*, found nowhere else in Maconchy's oeuvre, is the extensive use of allusion and outright quotation.

Maconchy's letters to Ursula Vaughan Williams trace the genesis and composition of *The Sofa*. Ralph Vaughan Williams appears to have played at least a modest role. He critiqued the music, as well as contributing to the libretto. As Maconchy revealed in her interview with John Skiba, "Vaughan-Williams [*sic*] saw the scores of *The Three Strangers* and *The Sofa*, he particularly liked the frivolous music in *The Sofa* and contributed to the pun 'so far so good.'"<sup>6</sup> Maconchy and her husband were frequent visitors to the Vaughan Williams home during this period. As Ursula Vaughan Williams recalled:

...Ralph loved to have them and to hear what Betty was writing. At that time it was a very frivolous one-act opera for which I had written the libretto, and Ralph was full of suggestions for us both. He liked Betty's tunes and made her play through the new material each time she came, watching with great interest over its growth and development.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> These characteristics are observed by Florie Rothenberg in her D.M.A. dissertation, "Music for clarinet and string quartet by women composers" (University of Arizona, 1993).

<sup>6</sup> Skiba, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Ursula Vaughan Williams, *R.V.W.: A Biography of Ralph Vaughan Williams* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964), 389.

Before writing the libretto of *The Sofa*, Ursula Vaughan Williams had been engaged in the process of revising the libretto and dialogue to his comic opera *The Poisoned Kiss*. She rewrote a great deal of its stilted dialogue in pantomime rhymes.<sup>8</sup> In *The Sofa*, Ursula Vaughan Williams used a similar technique, for the majority of the libretto is cast as rhyming couplets. Curiously, Ursula Vaughan Williams's libretto directly alludes to a phrase from Evelyn Sharp's libretto to *The Poisoned Kiss*, in which the character Gallanthus, having heard the sound of a cat, remarks:

What's that? A cat?  
A bat? A rat?  
Oh, drat!  
Not that I'm anymore afraid of cats,  
Or bats, or rats,  
Than I am of gnats.<sup>9</sup>

This verse is virtually identical to a phrase from an ensemble in *The Sofa*, during which the guests engage in speculation about Dominic's fate (mm. 725-735):

Not a bat, or a cat, or a rat, or a toad, or a lizard, no, no!  
Not a knife, or a fork, or a bed, or a chair, or a table, no, no, not a table!

Why Ursula Vaughan Williams quoted Sharp's libretto cannot be determined, but it is possible that this action might have been suggested by *The Sofa*'s "unofficial" librettist, Ralph Vaughan Williams.

While the widespread use of rhyming couplets in the libretto creates an atmosphere reminiscent of British pantomime and Gilbert and Sullivan, the overall

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<sup>8</sup> Ursula Vaughan Williams, *Paradise Remembered*, 188.

<sup>9</sup> Ralph Vaughan Williams, *The Poisoned Kiss or The Empress and the Necromancer* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936), 16-17. Vocal score.



narrative structure of the opera significantly diverges from both traditions. In fact, the opera's arrangement fails to fully satisfy any format common to comic opera. Its highly eroticized subject matter might place it in the same category as a racy ballad opera in general, such as *The Threepenny Opera*, but unlike a ballad opera, it contains no spoken dialogue. Perhaps the closest conventional genre appropriate to *The Sofa* is Offenbach's *opéra bouffe*, hardly a genre cultivated by British composers, even Sir Arthur Sullivan.

*The Sofa* resembles Offenbach in the absurdity of the story; the proliferation of rhyming couplets (albeit in English); and musical quotations of popular, well-known works, as exemplified in Offenbach's *La belle Hélène* (1864). And at its core, *The Sofa* is a satirical parody of 1860s Parisian society and operetta of the Second Empire, the very subject of Offenbach's satirical works.

As reflected in her correspondence with Ursula Vaughan Williams, Maconchy's central ambitions for her opera reveal another aspect that conjures Offenbach: creating a gradual accelerando of farce and ebullience over the course of the dramatic action. In a letter to Ursula dated March 17, 1957, Maconchy writes pointedly,

I think we must beware of being too long, and must make one action move as quickly as possible – because it is sad to have to cut one's favourite bits – but however good words or music are they'll be boring if the timing isn't right. And I feel one wants a gradual accelerando in the timing from beginning to end. E.g. I think it is right for the Grandmother to have a longish tirade (as you've given her) as it's near the beginning [...] but as it goes on, and particularly as it draws near the climax I feel it must move quickly – i.e. the recitative-like conversation between the young lady and the British officer must be very brief and to the point – and then the action will have to be momentarily held up by his 'shooting-season' aria – and then move on again quickly [...] In general the music does lengthen everything astonishingly, doesn't it? I will make the conversational recitative-like bits move as rapidly as I can – but one wants the music to proliferate a bit in the set-pieces (solo songs and especially the ensembles - ) and must allow a good bit of time, too for the in-between bits of music where there are

no words. So I think the explanatory and conversational bits must be pretty brief and business-like, or we shall find we are getting beyond the limits of a one-act affair: (which I feel sure would be a mistake, don't you?) Do you concur in this? – I've been turning it round in my head. This rather elusive business of timing seems to be one of the most important factors in the success of an opera, I think.<sup>10</sup>

Maconchy's overriding concern regarding the opera's length was the driving force behind her decision not to provide an overture, as well as her rejection of the idea for a gambling scene where the young men engaged in a game of roulette with the sofa calling out the winning number.<sup>11</sup> The original libretto contained an extended drinking song, which, while not entirely cut out, was later trimmed extensively.<sup>12</sup> About this ensemble, Ursula Vaughan Williams noted, "One of the things I did in this...was to write a big drinking song, burgundies for basses, clarets for tenors, rosés for altos, and the sopranos had white wines...Unfortunately the song proved too long for the structure of the scene and all that is left is the champagnes-for-all chorus."<sup>13</sup>

By contrasting small ensemble numbers and frequent entries (and re-entries) of the chorus, the musical momentum hurtles forward as the arias, interspersed between lively waltzes and chorus numbers, become increasingly concise. This formal design creates the sense of a gradual *accelerando* as the farcical action becomes increasingly dynamic and dramatic as the opera moves rapidly toward the climactic scene of Edward and Monique on the sofa and Dominic's restoration. Maconchy achieved this sense of

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<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Maconchy to Ursula Vaughan Williams, March 17, 1957, Ursula Vaughan Williams Correspondence, MS Mus. 1714/3/4: 1937-1999, British Library Manuscript Collection.

<sup>11</sup> Indication of the cuts are made by Maconchy on the original manuscript.

<sup>12</sup> The extended drinking song is present in the original MS.

<sup>13</sup> Ursula Vaughan Williams, *Paradise Remembered*, 188.

relentless forward motion in a similar manner such as one constructs a play. In “A Composer Speaks,” Maconchy notes:

Dramatic and emotional tension is created by means of counterpoint in much the same way as happens in a play. The characters are established as individuals, each with his own differentiated characteristics: the drama then grows from the interplay of these characters – the clash of their ideas and the way in which they react upon each other.<sup>14</sup>

In order to generate the right amount of comedic flair, Maconchy decided to take the dramatic tension a step further, writing to her librettist, “I think we must make all the contrast we can between individual characters (both in their solos and in the ensembles). And to make the dramatic high points stand out – exaggerating them if necessary.”<sup>15</sup>

While Maconchy is clear concerning the effect she wanted to create, there is very little mention in her correspondence of the music she intended to parody. Two exceptions to this reticence stand out, however. In her manuscript without amendments, Maconchy wrote, near the beginning of Edward’s brief aria: “gun-shots to be delivered in the manner of Beethoven’s 9<sup>th</sup> symphony.”<sup>16</sup> While there are no literal gun-shots, his “shooting area” certainly evokes a spirit reminiscent of the lively scherzo of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony.

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<sup>14</sup> Maconchy, “A Composer Speaks,” 28.

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Maconchy to Ursula Vaughan Williams, June 3, 1957, Ursula Vaughan Williams Correspondence, MS Mus. 1714/3/4: 1937-1999, British Library Manuscript Collection.

<sup>16</sup> This indication is made on page 245 of Maconchy’s original manuscript of *The Sofa*, Elizabeth Maconchy Archive, St. Hilda’s College, Oxford.

The second reference, from an undated draft of the opera's synopsis, indicates that the Grandmother's aria is to be sung "in Queen of the Night Style."<sup>17</sup> While the role of the Grandmother is written for mezzo-soprano, along the margin, Maconchy had written, "Coloratura Aria, (Soprano) Grandmother."<sup>18</sup> One can only speculate as to whether or not the idea of writing the role of the Grandmother for a soprano was ever seriously contemplated, but the resulting coloratura passage, transposed for mezzo, makes the allusion all the more amusing.

While these two allusions in *The Sofa* are the only ones cited by the composer herself, there are several more allusions dispersed throughout the score, notably those to Mahler and Prokofiev. In the absence of any further evidence, why Maconchy chose to make these allusions (if they were indeed conscious) will remain unclear.

As the opera was not a result of a commission, Maconchy and Ursula Vaughan Williams would have to wait for the right opportunity to stage their work. While Maconchy's correspondence with her collaborator suggests that they were actively engaged in finding a venue for their new opera as it neared completion in 1957, their hard work was rewarded when *The Sofa* was produced in 1959.

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<sup>17</sup> Undated draft of the opera's synopsis, Elizabeth Maconchy Archive, St. Hilda's College, Oxford.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Reception of *The Sofa*

The New Opera Workshop at Sadler's Wells Theatre gave the première of *The Sofa* on December 13, 1959, as part of a double-bill with John Joubert's *In the Drought*. A subsidy of the New Opera Company, the New Opera Workshop was formed in 1958 to serve as a suitable venue to train singers, producers, and conductors. The entity was also charged with producing new works by contemporary British composers. If an opera proved successful in the workshop, it might later be considered for professional production.<sup>1</sup> While the critical reception of *The Sofa* was mixed, many aspects of the work were nevertheless praised. A positive reception was not enough to provide further performances, however. In order to understand the history of *The Sofa*, it is vital to consider, in brief, the operatic climate in Britain after the Second World War.

#### A mixed reception

At the conclusion to her article on Maconchy's trilogy of one-act operas, "Three Welcome Strangers" (2007), Nicola LeFanu writes: "There are many reasons why, over the centuries, operas become neglected: musical, social, economic, political. Taste can be fickle, and cultural tsars more so. In Maconchy's case I think ignorance of her work may well stem from musical politics, in the broadest sense; but I do not think the neglect

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<sup>1</sup> Program from the 1959 production of *The Sofa* at Sadler's Wells, Elizabeth Maconchy Archive, St. Hilda's College, Oxford.

relates to the quality of the music.”<sup>2</sup> Throughout the reviews of *The Sofa*, Maconchy’s music receives high marks. The actual performance, however, left much to be desired.

As a semi-professional production with the aim of providing training for later productions, Ursula Vaughan Williams’s humorous recollections of the opera’s rehearsals in her autobiography paint a vivid portrait of the hands-on approach required of a limited budget, as well as some of the early surprises she and Maconchy encountered:

The producer, Michael Geliot, was very young, and we had to explain the procedure at balls, for instance, that chaperones sat around the room, and did not dance (there were some extra women in the chorus for this production) and that everyone, men and women, wore gloves. We felt that we were, probably, the last survivors of an age that had gone to such festivities, but we were startled when we discovered that word had got round that we had both been at the Eve of Waterloo Ball in Brussels. As it was a workshop production I found myself much involved in helping with wardrobe problems, for the choice was limited to a collection of hireable old clothes from a sub-department of the Wardrobe of Sadler’s Wells kept in a house a few doors up the road from the theatre. Michael Geliot and I blundered about in the confined spaces between dress racks, clutching lists of measurements of the cast, and later I spent a good deal of time inventing decorations for hair, based on old fashion plates. This was an amusing occupation involving combs, feathers, flowers, sequins and glue, and I eventually helped with the disguise of the all-important sofa. I disposed of some flat-heeled soft shoes I’d had to descend to when recovering from an immobilising sprained ankle. Decorated with buckles they achieved an honourable end on the stage.<sup>3</sup>

The reception of the opera’s single performance in the press was neither overwhelmingly bad nor bracingly good. In *The Times*, Maconchy’s skill for writing for voices was praised. The anonymous critic noted that both Joubert and Maconchy’s operas “suffered from inadequate projection and inaudible words, as is almost inevitable

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<sup>2</sup> Nicola LeFanu, “Three Welcome Strangers,” *Opera* 58, no. 11 (November 2007): 1317.

<sup>3</sup> Ursula Vaughan Williams, *Paradise Remembered*, 201-202.

in the circumstances of production, but both composers misjudged their orchestration. Nevertheless, each in its way had operatic virtues.”<sup>4</sup>

The title of Donald Mitchell’s review in *The Daily Telegraph* proclaimed, “Sofa as Hero of Ironic Plot.” While he noted that the opera made “a diverting half-hour or so,” he felt that the music contained “a strange mixture of Offenbach and Vaughan Williams.” Ultimately, he concluded that the opera did not successfully capture “the ironic flavour of the dénouement. For what is basically so erotic a subject, her music is altogether too amiable and innocent.”<sup>5</sup>

In *The Observer*, Edmund Tracey noted, as did several others, that the performers were not quite up to par with the material. He also found the orchestration to be a bit “dense and fussy” in places, writing:

The Sofa [*sic*], had a distinct and agreeable personality of its own. It was, so far as I could judge from a rather inadequate performance, uneven in quality. The musical texture was sometimes dense and fussy, and there seemed to be a lack of co-ordination, as well as seriously diminished momentum, in the larger ensembles. But for the most part the musical invention was lively and apt – though if Miss Maconchy and her librettist Ursula Vaughan Williams, would prune some of the verbal jokes and trust to the music to articulate the dramatic movement, the piece would gain in swiftness and point.

“The Sofa” is unique in that it includes the only attempt I have ever seen to present the act of copulation on the public stage – and that this was achieved, both vigorously and without offence, reflects very creditably upon the ingenuity of the two ladies who, with every appearance of moral health and charm, came to bow and beam at us at the end.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> “Double Bill By New Opera Workshop,” *The Times*, December 14, 1959.

<sup>5</sup> D[onald] C[hables] P[eter] M[itche]ll, “Sofa as Hero of Ironic Plot,” *Daily Telegraph*, December 14, 1959.

<sup>6</sup> Edmund Tracey, “Two New Operas,” *The Observer*, December 20, 1959.

Harold Rosenthal was Maconchy's harshest critic; his reviews of the opera appeared in both *The Financial Times* and *Opera*. While he echoed sentiments expressed by others, noting that the diction and the singers left much to be desired, his greatest qualm was with Ursula Vaughan Williams's libretto:

As in the case of *The Poisoned Kiss*, Ursula Vaughan Williams makes the joke go on too long and although Miss Maconchy has written some most pleasant and singable music, one wants a later-day [*sic*] Offenbach to do this story musical justice....The moments of attempted seduction and love's consummation left little to the imagination, and one wonders whether a public performance would have got away with them!<sup>7</sup>

In *The Chesterian*, Scott Goddard lamented again that the diction was poor, even remarking that it deserved better performance. As for the climactic scene, he wrote, "...for a moment, one's eyes hardly dare accept their own testimony. There was raucous laughter, much indiscreet giggling and one felt the shudder of the superstitious; indeed I gather that some people that night were startled out of their lives, others indeed mortally shocked."<sup>8</sup>

While the opera may have been viewed by some critics as too risqué, it was far milder than many theatrical works mounted on the British stage, such as the plays of John Osborne and Joe Orton.<sup>9</sup> But within the context of the conservative operatic stage in England, *The Sofa's* frank treatment of erotic subject matter was nearly unheard of. While the Lord Chamberlain had the power to censor any theater work deemed obscene

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<sup>7</sup> Harold Rosenthal, "New Opera Workshop," *The Financial Times*, December 16, 1959.

<sup>8</sup> Scott Goddard, "London Letter," *The Chesterian* 34, no. 201 (Winter 1960): 100.

<sup>9</sup> For further discussion, see Anthony Aldgate and James C. Robertson, *Censorship in Theatre and Cinema* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005); and Anthony Aldgate, *Censorship and the Permissive Society: British Cinema and Theatre 1955-1965* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).



or indecent until 1968 (at which time the Theatres Act was abolished), restrictions had begun to ease after the Second World War. While homosexuality was strictly banned until 1958, displays of heterosexual amorousness were accepted. The passage of the Obscene Publications Act on July 21, 1959, proved to be further evidence of the gradual easing of censorship, enabling D.H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* to be printed legally in Great Britain the following year.<sup>10</sup>

Early on in the creative process, both Maconchy and Ursula Vaughan Williams appear to have been aware of balance and delicacy needed for the work to meet the requirements for license from the Lord Chamberlain. In one of her letters to her librettist, Maconchy wrote, "I think you have been very successful in setting the Grandmother to make her meaning quite clear, while keeping on the right side of the Censor. 'Consummation' is excellent."<sup>11</sup> An early synopsis of the plot likewise questions even the possibility of staging the scene during which the curse is lifted. At that point, the synopsis reads, "After a few moments there is a sudden crash, a loud scream from the lady, - and the lights go up, revealing no sofa, the lady on the floor (if permitted by the censor) and the Prince confronting the dumbfounded and infuriated Englishman."<sup>12</sup>

To prevent any accusations of "indecenty," this climactic scene was ultimately solved with a blackout. Yet even this solution did not save the production from raised

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<sup>10</sup> Aldgate and Robertson, *Censorship in Theatre and Cinema*, 129.

<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Maconchy to Ursula Vaughan Williams, March 17, 1957, Ursula Vaughan Williams Correspondence, MS Mus. 1714/3/4: 1937-1999, British Library Manuscript Collection.

<sup>12</sup> Undated synopsis of *The Sofa*, Elizabeth Maconchy Archive, St. Hilda's College, Oxford.

eyebrows, as LeFanu recounts in an excerpt from an account of the New Opera

Company's history:

I was entranced by the upholstered tenor who turned into an upholstered sofa, and even more so by Monique. In my innocence the point of the plot (the seduction) was quite lost on me: I was mystified that people were shocked by the lovely moment when Dominic ("so far so good") embraced Monique embracing Edward and her necklace went trickling downstage.<sup>13</sup>

While the production did not appear to create any issues with the censor, the opera's frankness was still scandalous enough for one affronted composer to walk out of the performance.<sup>14</sup>

### Opera in Britain after the Second World War

With all of this promising scandal and enchanting music, why did *The Sofa* not score a rousing success? The reason lies in the state of the British theater and opera in the 1950s. While opera in Britain certainly has a long history, it was a genre that only fitfully achieved public appeal. As Nathaniel Lew remarks:

Before the Second World War...opera in Britain was trapped in a vicious circle. Attempts to mount performances in the vernacular were rarely financially successful because they alienated the existing upper-class audience. But the middle classes, with little experience of and interest in opera, were unlikely to develop an interest without access to performances in a language they understood.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This excerpt is quoted on page 15 of Independent Opera's program for the 2007 production of *The Sofa* and *The Departure*.

<sup>14</sup> Email from LeFanu to author, April 23, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Nathaniel Lew, "A New and Glorious Age: Constructions of National Opera in Britain, 1945-1951" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2001), 128.

Whereas other European nations had their own national operatic styles, the only operatic genre that took hold in Britain the late nineteenth century were the Savoy operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. Despite the efforts of composers such as Charles Villiers Stanford, Rutland Boughton, Holst, and Vaughan Williams, serious opera by native composer in England had a spotty and flickering half-life.

One of the factors that changed attitudes to opera after the Second World War was the sharp alterations in public and social policies, as Britain sought to rebuild itself.<sup>16</sup> One of the results of this shift was a revitalization of public funding for the arts which brought about the formation of the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1946.<sup>17</sup> As Eric Walter White observes in *The Arts Council of Great Britain* (1975), “The Arts Council inherited...a kind of dual operatic priority – to establish the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, as a national lyric theatre for opera and ballet, and to consolidate the work of the Sadler’s Wells Opera Company at Sadler’s Wells Theatre.”<sup>18</sup> Among the other activities was the establishment of subsidies for small touring groups that introduced opera to a broader audience of all classes. The greatest success of the Arts Council in its promotion of opera, however, was its ability to provide a significantly more stable (though hardly

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<sup>16</sup> For an analysis of the various cultural changes in British culture after 1945, see Robert Hewison, *In Anger: Culture in the Cold War 1945-60* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1981).

<sup>17</sup> For a history of the Art Council of Great Britain’s development, see Eric Walter White, *The Arts Council of Great Britain* (London: Davis-Poynter, 1975). While the Arts Council did not receive its official charter until 1946, its planning had been in the works for quite some time as a continuation of public funding support for the arts after the war.

<sup>18</sup> White, 129.

perfect) infrastructure for the financing of contemporary British operas, enabling opera to thrive in Britain.<sup>19</sup>

The fateful event that changed the status of opera in England – and thus its narrative trajectory – was the 1945 première of Benjamin Britten’s *Peter Grimes*. The result of Britten’s success was a breakthrough in a medium in which other British composers had limited success. Lew insightfully remarks:

The oblivion into which so many English operas vanished was strikingly demonstrated by the furor produced when the breakthrough finally came. Critics hailed the 1945 premiere of Britten’s *Peter Grimes* as if no English composer had written an opera since the death of Henry Purcell, 250 years before. The grandiose claims on Britten’s behalf willfully or ignorantly ignored a century of contributions by figures such as Balfe, Sullivan, Charles Villiers Stanford, Frederick Delius, Ethel Smyth, Boughton, Gustav Holst, and Vaughan Williams. But they were valid insofar as no opera by any of these figures had ever retained a strong enough place in the repertory to make its revival either an artistic necessity or a likely financial success in 1945.<sup>20</sup>

As observed by Lew and others, this breakthrough of a native operatic idiom was not so much an overnight success as it was part of a gradual process aided by the slow, but steady rise and modest successes of English operas in the early half of the twentieth-century. These modest achievements gradually brought about a growing awareness and popularity of the medium among the middle class.<sup>21</sup>

While *Peter Grimes* was widely praised for its modern retelling of George Crabbe’s tale of an individual persecuted by an unjust society, Lew argues that some of its success derived from its incorporation of quite conservative musical styles:

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>20</sup> Lew, 132.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 132-133.

Although much of the response to any high-profile premiere (especially the negative criticism) inevitably focuses on the work's difficult newness, the conservatism of Britten's musical-dramatic technique in *Peter Grimes* was essential to its success. Despite an unconventional subject matter for its time, at least considered in the light of the operatic canon, the opera is formally and dramatically conventional.<sup>22</sup>

Yet it was not merely the work itself, but also its time and place that allowed for *Peter Grimes* to become such a considerable success. Lew argues that the re-birth of British opera coincided with the decline of the oratorio, the dominant medium which had come to define Britain's choral tradition:

The "rebirth" of English opera in 1945 with *Peter Grimes* neatly coincided with the beginnings of this decline; as a prestige and interest finally shifted back to opera, there was a sharp fall-off in the writing of English oratorios. The new interest in opera thus drew on an already energy central to English music-making; salient elements of the oratorio were conspicuously carried over into post-war English opera.<sup>23</sup>

As the oratorio waned, Britten stepped into the spotlight by providing an opera containing a number of expertly composed choral scenes. With the bar set so high by Britten's success, his operas inevitably became the touchstone by which every successive British opera would be judged. In the flood of operatic activity that followed in the wake of *Peter Grimes*, British composers found it difficult to compete with Britten. Perhaps no aspect was more highly praised than the perceived "modernity" of his operas. This had less to do with the music itself than with Britten's ability to create a dramatic fusion between music and libretto. Yet there was also something absolutely new and timely

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 130.

about the nature of the librettos that Britten chose to set. Irene Morra argues, in

*Twentieth-Century British Authors and the Rise of Opera in Britain* (2007):

The music of the first British renaissance relied on literature to validate the national worth of its musical aesthetics. Towards the middle of the twentieth century, this tradition grew to acknowledge the increased intermediality of the arts, and to incorporate a self-conscious literary modernity. The consequent “second renaissance” therefore actively encouraged an unprecedented contribution from recognized British literary figures. The majority of modern British operas signal their intellectual aspirations through their subject or libretto, and evince a thematic concern for the position of the individual within a society defined by various political, social, sexual, and artistic authorities. At the same time, they tend to attempt to universalize the situation of their protagonists, rather than to confine themselves to overly specific narrative contexts.<sup>24</sup>

After *Peter Grimes*, many operas by composers belonging to earlier generations were attacked viciously by Donald Mitchell and others for their old-fashioned librettos, especially when compared with the acceptably highbrow subject matter of Britten’s operas. Two victims of this upsurge in “high modernist” critical fashions were Arthur Bliss (*The Olympians*, 1949), and William Walton (*Troilus and Cressida*, 1954). Both of these composers and their mythical operas were accused of being outdated and nostalgic. In the case of *Troilus and Cressida*, while the music was praised by several critics, most critics dismissed Walton’s score as an old-fashioned “grand opera.”<sup>25</sup> In the reception of Bliss’s comic opera, the primary complaints were, first, its length, and second, that it failed to fit into any accepted category. As the musicologist Edward J. Dent remarked in a letter to Bliss, “The real trouble about the opera is that...there is too much stuff – it makes the opera feel very long and rather exhausting though never tedious. I think it is

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<sup>24</sup> Irene Morra, *Twentieth-Century British Authors and the Rise of Opera in Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 7.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Kennedy, *Portrait of Walton* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 181.

all much too ‘grand’ and I should have preferred it treated more as opéra comique, even at the cost of a throw-back to Offenbach on Olympus.”<sup>26</sup>

The mixed reception accorded *The Olympians* was indicative of a larger problem. The operas that proved successful tended to be those with a serious subject matter. In an article entitled “Composer and Librettist,” appearing in *Composer* in 1966, Eric Crozier, the librettist for Britten’s *Albert Herring*, lamented, “For my own part, I find it regrettable that so few comic operas have been written in our time, because comedy does not call for ‘the public voice’ to anything like the same extent as drama or tragedy.”<sup>27</sup> The problem, perhaps, was not so much the lack of “a call,” but rather the lack of the right circumstances. In *The English Musical Renaissance* (1966), Frank Howes argues that comic opera over the course of the early twentieth century failed to find a consistent formula as it “never built up into a viable tradition that could have gone on from Gilbert and Sullivan in an English national style comparable to Italian *opera buffa* or German *Singspiel* and so have furnished the repertory for the English equivalent of an *Opéra comique* or a *Volksoper*.”<sup>28</sup> Even Britten’s *Albert Herring* was not spared from Howes’s pessimistic assessment of comic opera in Britain. Howes argued that “the hero’s lapse from virtue has not the sharp point of the original French *conte* from which the plot was drawn and takes three acts to mount,” with his ultimate opinion being: “The wit and the

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<sup>26</sup> Edward Dent, Neville Cardus and William McNaught, “Three Views of ‘The Olympians,’” *The Musical Times* 113, no. 1548 (February 1972): 145.

<sup>27</sup> Eric Crozier, “Composer and Librettist,” *Composer* 18 (January 1966): 5.

<sup>28</sup> Frank Howes, *The English Musical Renaissance* (New York: Stein and Day, 1966), 317.

humour do not mix, though there are amusing instances of both to be found in the opera.”<sup>29</sup>

### The problem of an indefinable medium

Failing to subscribe to an identifiable idiom, *The Sofa* constituted yet another instance of the “problem” of comic opera as discussed by Howes. According to the critics, it fell somewhere between Offenbach, Johann Strauss, Jr., Vaughan Williams, and Britten, but was certainly more “Irish whimsy than Gallic satire.”<sup>30</sup> Yet there were other reservations as well. At the beginning of his review of *The Sofa* appearing in *Musical Events*, Ernest Chapman wrote:

One-act operas are notoriously tricky things to write. If the scenario is dramatic, it must be compressed to reach a convincing climax in a short time. If it is light-weight, the total effect is likely to be slight. Either way, it is the experienced opera composer, rather than the newcomer, who is more likely to succeed. Yet lack of opportunity in England often drives the inexperienced ones to attempt short rather than full-length operas.<sup>31</sup>

The proliferation of chamber operas after the Second World War was largely an outcome of the musical climate articulated by Chapman: while there were commissions to be had, the decision as to who would receive them was left in the hands of a privileged few. Without any guarantee of performances, it was financially out of the question for most composers to embark on the treacherous journey of composing a full-length opera during their scant free time. Yet if they wanted to enter into the newly exciting opera scene,

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 316.

<sup>30</sup> Harold Rosenthal, “Opera Diary,” *Opera* 11, no. 2 (February 1960): 151.

<sup>31</sup> Ernest Chapman, “New Opera Workshop,” *Musical Events* 15, no. 3 (March 1960): 23.



chamber opera provided a portal, as it was cheaper to produce. Unsurprisingly, it was even more difficult for women to gain access to the key that would open the door to operatic success. Maconchy and Grace Williams debated the issue of opera commissions in their correspondence. In her program notes for Independent Opera's 2007 revival of *The Sofa* and *The Departure*, Sophie Fuller observes:

One of the topics under frequent discussion in their letters was the composition of opera and getting opera performed. In 1949 Maconchy wrote to Williams: "Why oh! why haven't they given you a commission? (Possibly their 'advisers' think anything so large as an opera unsuitable for women?)." Like Smyth before them, Maconchy and Williams found that fighting for good, committed performances required dogged determination, assurance and self-belief.<sup>32</sup>

While Maconchy was fortunate to secure performances for her one-act operas, she never received a commission for a full-scale opera.<sup>33</sup>

In an article entitled "The Performance of New Music in Britain," which appeared in the autumn 1959 issue of *The Chesterian*, Robin Hull lamented that while young composers were now able to secure a first performance of their work (a remarkable improvement compared to the difficulties faced by composers of Maconchy's generation), securing a second performance proved infinitely more difficult.<sup>34</sup> Yet the climate for women composers, continued to be discouraging indeed. Maconchy had to wait eight years before *The Sofa* was revived for a second performance, this time as part

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<sup>32</sup> Sophie Fuller, "'Tremendous noise by a lady': It wasn't easy being a woman composer in the 20<sup>th</sup> century," program notes, *The Sofa, The Departure*, Independent Opera at Sadler's Wells Theatre, London (November 13, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> LeFanu, "Three Welcome Strangers," 1315.

<sup>34</sup> Robin Hull, "The Performance of New Music in Britain," *The Chesterian* 34, no. 200 (Autumn 1959): 34-35.

of a triple bill with Holst's *The Wandering Scholar* and Hindemith's *There and Back* for the 1967 Camden Festival. Again, the opera received mixed reviews. Critics praised the music, but noted the singers' poor diction, as well as the Camden Festival's failure to provide a synopsis of the opera. In his review in *The Musical Times*, Winton Dean lamented:

Elizabeth Maconchy's opera was the least familiar, and it suffered considerably from the major defect of the evening, the inaudibility of at least half the words. This is vital matter in comic opera, especially when the programme (unwisely – and exceptionally for Camden-St. Pancras) offers no synopsis. Even a simple point can escape notice, and the musical flavour may fade with the verbal. It was difficult to determine exactly how improper Miss Maconchy – having chosen a subject with nicely graded opportunities for impropriety – was permitting herself to be.<sup>35</sup>

After the Camden Festival production, it would be another ten years until the next revival of *The Sofa* in 1977. This consisted of a triple bill with Maconchy's other two one-act operas, *The Departure* and *The Three Strangers* performed in Middlesbrough by Opera Nova, an amateur opera company. After this amateur offering, another thirty years would elapse before its revival in 2007, the year marking the centenary of the composer's birth.

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<sup>35</sup> Winton Dean, "Three Comic Operas," *The Musical Times* 108, no. 1490 (April 1967): 345.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the high musical values evinced in *The Sofa*, circumstances beyond Maconchy's control worked against a proper evaluation of the opera. In *The Sofa*, she succeeded in writing a comic opera that was brilliantly paced, an achievement in which few other serious British composers had been able to achieve. Its foreign setting in nineteenth-century Vienna, coupled with its erotic subject matter and brilliantly spun web of musical parody proved too challenging for musical tastes in Britain of the 1950s, which were still highly suspect of comic opera. As a chamber opera, *The Sofa* provided Maconchy with a chance to vie for operatic glory, but without decisive or lasting success. Combined with the effects of "the Britten Era,"<sup>1</sup> which came to dominate not only the musical climate in Britain but also the writing of its history, it was difficult for any opera composer other than Britten to receive a fair hearing. For a women composer, however, Britten's achievement presented an insurmountable challenge. As Elisabeth Lutyens remarked, "If Britten wrote a bad score, they'd say, 'He's had a bad day'. If I'd written one it was because I was a woman."<sup>2</sup>

Perhaps the most ironic aspect of the reception of *The Sofa* is that Maconchy, who had been severely criticized for the "abrasiveness" of her music, was now criticized for being too charming and lightweight. These diverging critical viewpoints on her music reflect a larger conundrum, however. As LeFanu remarks, "People who had thought of

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<sup>1</sup> See Philip Brett, "The Britten Era," in *Music and Sexuality in Britten: Selected Essays*, ed. George E. Haggerty (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 204-223.

<sup>2</sup> Halstead, 162.

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.)”<sup>3</sup> With the resurgence of interest in Maconchy’s music following the centenary of her birth, her music is finally beginning to attract the recognition that it merits. The latest revival of *The Sofa*’s revival proved efficacious in this regard. Writing in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Andrew Porter proclaimed:

In my early days as a critic, Maconchy was not prominent. Her contributions to the 1951 Festival of Britain, the Sixth String Quartet and the Theme and Variations for String Orchestra, are but passing references in the *Times* volume of reviews recording the events of that year of British musical achievement. But I like to think that I heard and hailed Maconchy’s merits when I reviewed her operas a half-century ago. The Independent Opera revivals provided confirmation. I won’t put her beside Bartók—not yet, not till I’ve heard more of her music. But maybe that’s where she should be ranked.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> LeFanu, Part 2, 2.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Porter, “Are you sitting comfortably?” *Times Literary Supplement*, November 23, 2007.

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