

ERICA SIEGEL, *THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF ELIZABETH MACONCHY* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2023). ISBN: 9781837650514, 352pp, £95 (hardback)

Understandings of music history as a gendered discourse have flourished considerably since the advent of feminist music criticism in the late twentieth century. Erica Siegel's book exposes and remedies a gap within this field by providing the first full-length biographical study on the composer Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–1994). This book examines Maconchy's career and reception history from diverse viewpoints including modernism, nationalism, and patriarchal advantage, while probing fundamental questions regarding canon formation and the preservation of women's musical legacies more broadly. It extends an emerging stream of publications by Boydell Press which reclaims untold histories of women composers from the peripheries into mainstream musicology; an endeavour fittingly resonant of Maconchy's advocacy for women composers and making 'cracks in the proverbial glass ceiling' of a male-dominated industry.<sup>1</sup>

Structurally, the book is substantial in length with thirteen chapters bookended by an introduction and epilogue. At the end of the book, there is also a select bibliography that exemplifies the author's exhaustive unearthing of many previously unexamined primary sources, mainly housed at St Hilda's College, Oxford. The ease with which these archival materials are interlaced with data drawn from obituaries, censuses, newspapers, and first-hand interviews is a definite strength of the research, yielding a wealth of new information about the composer. A noteworthy example may be seen in the Chronological List of Works (281–310) where corrections are made to Maconchy's own documentation of dates for compositions and first performances.

Although biographical in nature, Siegel augments the content with a seamless integration of analytical readings bolstered by contemporaneous reviews and anchored in the composer's most significant works—that is, her thirteen string quartets composed between 1932 and 1983. This fusion of historical and musical analysis facilitates a comprehensive, balanced approach, through which the book achieves its aim to illuminate and chart the developments of Maconchy's compositional style across a vastly fluctuating set of personal, political, and social contexts. The resultant narrative, immersive in scope, is effectively conveyed in a limpid prose style and generously

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Laura Watson, Ita Beausang, Jennifer O'Connor-Madsen (eds.), *Women and Music in Ireland*, Irish Musical Studies, 13 (Dublin: Boydell Press, 2022); Anja Bunzel, *The Songs of Johanna Kinkel: Genesis, Reception, Context* (Dublin: Boydell Press, 2020).

adorned with annotations and illustrations, including original photographs, portraits, and score excerpts.

Like several recent biographies on early-twentieth-century women composers,<sup>2</sup> the introduction engages the reader through a series of striking paradoxes. First, despite an equal education to her male counterparts and sterling reputation at the Royal College of Music (RCM), Maconchy's publishing opportunities were circumscribed by gender-normative biases within companies who sought only small-scale works from 'women composers'. Second, her private, modest personality hampered any attention she may otherwise have attracted through her public-facing roles. And third, her numerous accolades, including a successful première at the Proms, failed to cement a more permanent position for the composer in music history. These incongruities culminate in a poetic closing sentence that simultaneously encapsulates the main challenge encountered by Siegel during her process of biographical (re)construction: 'From wars to fame, illness, motherhood, and critical acclaim, this biography traces Maconchy's life and music from fragments that remain' (3).

As acknowledged by the author, these disparate fragments account for some minor lacunae in the first chapter. Among these are the circumstances of how Maconchy's parents initially came into contact, specifics about the composer's early education, the origins of her musical inclinations within an ostensibly 'unmusical family', and information about the type of training she received during piano and composition lessons beyond the identification of teachers. Although these gaps are likely to remain unfilled given the absence of a journal or similar ephemera, the chapter nonetheless asserts its authority in compiling the first survey of Maconchy's family lineage and childhood in Ireland, and thus constitutes a valuable contextual foundation from which future interpretations of Maconchy's music may follow.

Chapters 2–5 expand upon the author's doctoral research to examine the composer's reception history from her studies at the RCM to the beginning of the Second World

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<sup>2</sup> Select examples include: Ina Boyle's life-long devotion to composition arising from a sheltered background in Ita Beausang and Séamus de Barra, 'Preface', *Ina Boyle (1889–1967): A Composer's Life* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2018), vii; Rae Linda Brown's retelling of Florence Price's 'heartbreaking disappointments' as successes in Guthrie P. Ramsey Jr., 'Foreword', *The Heart of a Woman: The Life and Music of Florence B. Price* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020), vi; and that four very different women could undertake similar compositional paths in Leah Broad, *How Four Women Changed the Musical World* (London: Faber & Faber, 2023).

War (1923–1939).<sup>3</sup> Here, the reader follows manifold postulations pertaining to the development of Maconchy’s compositional career, each situated within, and at times distilled from, the turbulent musical landscape of interwar Britain. Of particular note is the emergence of two parallel narratives: one addressing the growth of the composer’s burgeoning reputation, as evidenced by an Octavia Scholarship (1929), success in the *Daily Telegraph* competition (1933), and performances via the Macnaughten-Lemare concert series (1931), the Society of Women Musicians (1931, 1933), and the BBC (1932, 1934); and the second which parses the—sometimes imperceptible—barriers that impeded such imagined progress.<sup>4</sup> This nuanced framing achieves a more holistic depiction of Maconchy’s nascent professional trajectory as one negotiated between growing acclaim and structural constraint.

Within these same chapters, Siegel enriches the narrative through succinct analytical readings of several early works. Especially commendable are perspectives on the formative influence of Ralph Vaughan Williams, with whom Maconchy began studying in late 1925. She traces a range of stylistic affinities between the pair, from an inclination toward modal writing in *Allegro for Flute* and *Ophelia’s Song* (16); to the quotation from *Flos Campi* in ‘Summer’ from *The Land* (39); and the melodic phrasing in Movement II of Quintet for Oboe and Strings, described as ‘highly reminiscent’ of her teacher (57). The opportunity to cross-reference Vaughan Williams’s feedback with published criticism from this period, reflects his pedagogical insight. Although not correlated explicitly, an example may be seen in Donald Tovey’s review of *The Land* (1930), in which a perceived tendency toward excessive repetition of thematic material seems to echo, in retrospect, Vaughan Williams’s early warning that the young composer ‘must not be allowed to overwork her plenty of ideas and knowledge’ (16). Collectively, these chapters cohere into a persuasive account of Vaughan Williams’s imprint on Maconchy’s early output, while elucidating the characteristics of her developing musical idiom.

Apart from a brief reference in the *Pandora Guide to Women Composers*,<sup>5</sup> Chapter 6 offers the first in-depth appraisal of Maconchy’s career against a backdrop of socio-political upheavals wrought by the Second World War. Richly contextualised, it

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<sup>3</sup> Erica Siegel, *Elizabeth Maconchy: The Early Years, 1923–1939* (PhD dissertation, University of California Riverside, 2016).

<sup>4</sup> Select examples include: the sexist assessment of the composer’s application for a Mendelssohn Scholarship (25), the lingering gender prejudices outside of the RCM to decline the publication of orchestral works by women (43), an early diagnosis of tuberculosis and consequential move to Brighton for treatment (48), and the onset of a tenuous relationship with the BBC (100).

<sup>5</sup> See Sophie Fuller, ‘Elizabeth Maconchy’, *The Pandora Guide to Women Composers: Britain and the United States 1629–Present* (London, Harper Collins, 1994), 200.

positions the limited dissemination of Maconchy's music within the confines of British wartime broadcasting constraints to interrogate the marketability and reception of modernist works during a pervasive cultural shift that prioritised broader audience engagement over esoteric appeal. Specifically addressed is the restriction of the BBC to a single airwave, its subsequent promotion of 'low-brow' programming, and the reserved music policies which outlined populist and nationalist aims. Although the impact of these constraints is clearly demonstrated, perhaps an apropos viewpoint could equate how, or if, concurrent developments of the time—such as the establishment of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) in 1940—affected Maconchy's prospects as a composer. In this chapter (and indeed hereafter),<sup>6</sup> Siegel also highlights the extensive lobbying efforts of Vaughan Williams, contributing new insights into the composer's support for his former female students as documented in extant correspondence.<sup>7</sup>

Chapter 7 proceeds by tracing Maconchy's increasingly busy schedule through the post-war years. Again, Siegel brings new appreciation to the composer's perseverance by foregrounding the concomitance of her achievements—including two premières and the Edwin Evans Memorial Prize—alongside various obstacles, such as mixed reviews, escalating tensions with the BBC (139–141), the growing departure from modernism in aesthetic trends, as well as clerical errors with both the BBC and her publisher at the time, Hinrichsen. Gender-related factors are also explicitly addressed here, with Siegel assessing their influence on Maconchy's compositional career. Notably, she acknowledges the demands of motherhood, crediting the help of a nanny, and points to misogynistic attitudes of the time, such as disparaging remarks made by Harold Rutland, who claimed: 'I would suggest that most women have quite enough to do [...] without their being expected to indulge in fantasies, or the concentrated thought and feeling that brings these fantasies to fruition as works of art' (136).

A sequence of favourable reviews, increased performances, and productivity underpins the content of Chapters 8 and 9. Among these, the selection of *Proud Thomas* for the coronation of Elizabeth II (1953) and inclusion of *Concertina for Bassoon and String Orchestra* in the Proms (1954) stand out, as does Maconchy's delivery of a pivotal paper entitled 'Composing and Its Problems' at the London Contemporary Music Centre

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<sup>6</sup> See pp. 121, 122, 126–127, 133, and 278.

<sup>7</sup> For additional examples see: Bryon Adams and Daniel M. Grimley (eds), *Vaughan Williams and his World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023); Lead Broad, 'An Unconventional Teacher', *Sunday Feature*, prod. by Caroline Donne (BBC Radio 3: 9 October 2022), [bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001cnt3](https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001cnt3); Sophie Fuller and Jenny Doctor (eds), *Music, Life, and Changing Times: Selected Correspondence between British Composers Elizabeth Maconchy and Grace Williams, 1927–77* (London: Routledge, 2021).

Composer's Concourse (149). Beyond individual biography, Siegel also evinces a broader panorama of historical gender disparities evidenced by: i) consistent imbalances in programming at coronation festivities (151); ii) public assumptions of women as housewives (157); iii) the controversies generated by an article written in part by Maconchy, entitled 'A Short Symposium on Women Composers', wherein attention is called to the disproportionate domestic burdens borne by women (194–195); and iv) the vastly contrasting amount of broadcasts received by Maconchy compared to her male contemporaries (199). The composer's work in opera is then discussed, with a focus on *The Sofa* (1957). Here, Siegel's evaluation of this one-act work supplies a sophisticated interpretation of its poetic sensibility, along with an incisive plot synopsis, and dynamic overview of its satirical parody and embedded eroticism.

Chapters 10 and 11 investigate the impact of administrative duties upon the composer's career between 1959 and 1973. Detailed throughout are her cultural diplomacy trips to Canada and the USSR during the Cold War, her election to Chair the Composer's Guild of Great Britain, her work on the BBC's Central Advisory Committee, her role as President of the Society for the Promotion of New Music, as well as many supplementary obligations chronicled in her appointment diary. Although these commitments encroached upon her time for composition—as reflected by a decline in output and the necessity for extended deadlines on commissions—Siegel adeptly illustrates how this period also marked a stylistic refinement in Maconchy's music. Through informative commentaries, she characterises this maturation as an economical treatment of thematic materials, rhythmic vigour, deft contrapuntal textures, and a streamlined approach to form, while additionally recognising the enduring influence of Vaughan Williams, as seen in *Serenate Concertante* (205). A rigorous engagement with primary sources again permeates these chapters, exemplified by the author's astute inference that the health challenges faced by Maconchy's friend Ina Boyle were likely related to stomach cancer—an unconfirmed diagnosis that Siegel judiciously gleans from sparse references in letters.

In the final two chapters, Siegel turns to the composer's later years, summing up Maconchy's legacy as one defined by triumph over adversity. Among the most poignant was the convergence of the composer's seventieth birthday celebrations—marked by BBC tributes, anniversary concerts, and a surge of public recognition—with the personal loss of her husband. Equally, if not more significantly, admirable is the framing of Maconchy's activism within the wider social and political movements of the 1970s. Her participation in the BBC Radio 3 program *Woman as Composers* (1973), her address 'A Woman Composer in a Man's World' at the 'Incorporated Society of Musicians' 77th Annual Meeting (1975), and her interview with Hugo Cole 'Why can't a woman?' (1977), are all analysed through a second-wave feminist lens, whereby recognition is afforded

to raising awareness of systemic inequalities, and indeed Maconchy's commitment to challenging entrenched gender biases.

The epilogue reflects on Maconchy's posthumous reception, juxtaposing the cultural context of her time—distinguished by the diminishing popularity of modernism, intellectualism, and chamber music—with the support of significant advocates like Vaughan Williams and Grace Williams. Although substantive, one might question if there is perhaps space for a more incisive synthesis of the impact of marriage on Maconchy's compositional career, given the presentation of marriage bars as a thematic allusion in the introduction, combined with the book's astute and sensitive handling of gender-specific concerns elsewhere throughout. Nonetheless, this does not detract from Siegel's overarching achievement: the provision of a revisionist biography that invites its readers firstly to grapple with intersections of gender, history, and creativity as they pertain to twentieth-century British music and, secondly, to mediate pre-existing discourses surrounding the silencing effects of gender norms in society.<sup>8</sup>

Overall, this biography is a testament to Siegel's scholarly thoroughness. Her prodigious pool of sources, perceptive analytical readings, and diverse historical perspectives collectively cast new light on Maconchy's distinctive musical style as well as the cultural milieu in which she so tirelessly strived to succeed. The study not only brings reinvigorated understandings to the 'cautionary tale of the uphill battle facing women in male-dominated professions'(1), but also enhances the ongoing discourse concerning the lingering impacts of these barriers on the imbalanced representation of women composers in music history today. The release of this book, amid a timely resurgence of interest in Maconchy,<sup>9</sup> ensures its relevance to a wide readership including those invested in modernist composition, women's musical legacies, and twentieth-century British culture, in addition to performers and practitioners seeking fresh interpretations of her music. It represents a pioneering contribution to

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<sup>8</sup> See for example: Laura Hamer (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to Women in Music since 1900* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Jill Halstead, *The Woman Composer: Creativity and the Gendered Politics of Musical Composition* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> Select examples of recent activity include: Erica Siegel and Kate Molleson, 'Destined for Greatest: Elizabeth Maconchy', *Composer of the Week* (BBC Radio 3: 13–17 May 2024) [bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001yzms](https://bbc.co.uk/programmes/m001yzms); Erica Jeal, 'Maconchy, Lutyens and Wallen: Works for Piano and Orchestra review—first-time recordings pack a punch', *Guardian*, 30 March 2023, [theguardian.com/music/2023/mar/30/maconchy-lutyens-and-wallen-works-for-piano-and-orchestra-review-first-time-recordings-pack-a-punch](https://theguardian.com/music/2023/mar/30/maconchy-lutyens-and-wallen-works-for-piano-and-orchestra-review-first-time-recordings-pack-a-punch); Nathasha Logues, 'Elizabeth Maconchy', *Oxford International Song Festival*, 2022, [oxfordsong.org/composer/elizabeth-maconchy](https://oxfordsong.org/composer/elizabeth-maconchy); *Songs of Elizabeth Maconchy & Ralph Vaughan Williams*, performed by James Geer (tenor) and Ronald Woodley (piano), Resonus, (2022), (CD) RES10299.

musicological scholarship, offering a wellspring of inspiration from which future studies into the life and music of Maconchy will surely ensue.

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