

The Maconchy Project

Music for Strings (1983)

by Elizabeth Machonchy

Foreword

The Composer and Her Influences

Elizabeth Maconchy (1907 – 1994) was born in Broxbourne, England to Irish parents. As a child, she lived in Ireland between 1917 and 1922, where her musical studies began with composer Dr. John F. Larchet at the Royal Irish Academy of Music in Dublin. From an early age, she displayed a natural talent for music, particularly composition, and was encouraged to seek formal education in London.¹ With the continuation of the Irish Civil War and the death of her father, Maconchy moved with her family to London in 1922.² Relocated to London, Maconchy began formal music education at the Royal College of Music (RCM) in 1923, where she began studying composition with Charles Wood. By 1925, she became a pupil of Ralph Vaughan Williams, with whom she studied until 1929.

While a student at the Royal College of Music, Maconchy was a sponge; attending as many concerts and studying as many styles and works as possible. What she lacked in rigorous, early training, she made up for with a voracious musical appetite and formidable natural talent.³ During this time, she became fascinated by the modernist movement in music. It was R. Vaughan Williams who became one of the most steadfast supporters of Maconchy's interests in that regard. In 1929, she was awarded The Octavia Travelling Scholarship which allowed her to study in Prague with Karel Boleslav Jirák (1891–1972). Prague was known as the “Avant-garde Capital of Europe,”⁴ and it was during this time that Maconchy gained the confidence to pursue her own musical sensibilities. Upon returning to England, Sir Charles Wood premiered her orchestral suite, *The Land* (1929), in a B.B.C. Promenade concert. It was the beginning of a

¹ Ibid., 11.

² Nicola LeFanu. “Elizabeth Maconchy: Some Biographical and Musical Notes.” One of the most grown-up review sites around. Music Web International, 2007. http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2007/Oct07/Maconchy_LeFanu.htm.

³ Blunnie, 12.

⁴ A. Barone. “Modernist Rifts in a Pastoral Landscape: Observations on the Manuscripts of Vaughan Williams's Fourth Symphony.” *The Musical Quarterly* 91, no. 1-2 (2009): 62.

lifetime of Proms commissions by Sir Wood and others which culminating in the commissioning of *Music for Strings* in 1983.

Maconchy's life changed in 1932 when, at the age of 25, she contracted tuberculosis; she moved with her husband to the country, where she lived for the rest of her life. Such a drastic change in circumstance might have upended the most creative among us, but Maconchy never stopped composing. She continued writing prolifically and maintained her involvement in the new-music community. In the early 1930s, she played an important role in organizing the Macnaghten-Lemare Concerts in London, a series which championed the music of young composers, including the likes of Benjamin Britten. She later became the Chairman of the Composers' Guild of Great Britain (now part of The Ivors Academy) in 1959 and the President of the Society for the Promotion of New Music after Britten's death in 1976. It was during this fifty-year, "middle period," between 1932 and 1983, that Maconchy wrote the works in which she considered to be her best work. In an interview in 1971 on Radio 3's show 'The Composer Speaks,' she explained that she found the string quartet to be the genre best suited to express her musical ideas—those being "music as an impassioned argument."⁵ Structure and motivic development are central aspects to Maconchy's music—more so than orchestral color or melody⁶—so some of her best work is evidenced in music written for stringed instruments, including *Symphony for Double String Orchestra* (1952-53) and *Music for Strings* (1983).

With the early influence of Holst and Vaughan Williams on her music, her works are an early reflection of the continued line of distinctly "English Music" that Vaughan Williams, in particular, endeavored to establish. However, early on in her composition studies at the RCM, the music of Béla Bartók caught Maconchy's interest. (In 1927, she wrote a piece called *Bluebeard and Fatima* which received comments by conservative RCM faculty suggesting an attempt to assimilate Bartók's style into her own.)⁷ Although studying with Bartók was never a viable option for her during her student years, the progression of her compositional output throughout the 20th century clearly displays his influence. Particularly evident in her string

⁵ Mathias, 93.

⁶ Though an exception might be her impressionistic *Nocturne* for Orchestra.

⁷ Rhiannon Mathias. *Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-century British Music a Blest Trio of Sirens*. Farnham, Surrey, U.K. ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub., 2012, 20.

quartets, Maconchy developed a technique of development and variation on short motivic materials and nontraditional scales. Within her orchestral work, similar techniques can be heard that incorporate her British Nationalist background with the harmonic transformations of Bartok. Through the string orchestra, a genre for which both Edward Elgar and Ralph Vaughan Williams were known, she presents works that—through techniques traceable to Bartok—are clearly divergent from the lush harmonies inherited by her teacher yet still maintain the essence of the Nationalist tradition from which she came. All of these styles are evidenced in *Music for Strings*.

R. Vaughan Williams was a “hands off” teacher and was known to tell his students that they must “work out their own salvation.”⁸ Some have argued that this passive attitude toward his students—including Elizabeth Maconchy—prevented them from blossoming into their full potential. Maconchy seems to have taken seriously the intention behind the quip and worked quietly and consistently out of the international spotlight to find her own voice in a tradition which did not quite fit her personality or style. In that way, she exhibits a style and musical personality completely unique; a style that can be seen as an organic progression out of the British Nationalist movement into the post-modern 20th century. With the rise of Modernism in the mid-20th century, with the conflicts that were raised regarding Nationalist ideals, she was part of a generation of British composers who were old enough to fully grasp and experience the World Wars, yet young enough to transform their Art in their wake.

The Music

Music for Strings was premiered on Prom 04 on Tuesday, July 26, 1883. It opened a program which included Rachmaninov’s Piano Concerto No. 4 and Dvořák’s Symphony No. 6. In 2007, it appeared at the Prom once again on a program of string orchestra music by Elgar, Grieg, and Finzi.

⁸ Doctor, Jennifer. ““Working for Her Own Salvation”: Vaughan Williams as Teacher of Elizabeth Maconchy, Grace Williams and Ina Boyle.” In *Vaughan Williams in Perspective: Studies of an English Composer*, edited by Lewis Foreman, 181–201. London: Albion Press, 1998.

The **first movement** represents Maconchy's propensity for development based on a short motif. Within the first chords can be found two tetrachords which are used throughout the movement. Though no evidence exists that Maconchy thought in terms of Allen Forte's methodology, his nomenclature is useful in this instance to represent these two tetrachords—(014) and (025). Out of these two harmonic cells, Maconchy draws out melodic and rhythmic developments which challenge the listener not only analytically, but emotionally.

The **second movement** is titled a Scherzo. The shortest movement of the 4, the humor implicit in the marking plays itself out in the juxtaposition of playful pizzicato lines with suggestively self-absorbed melodic lines. Like the first movement, the second is carefully constructed around motifs present in the opening cello melody.

The **third movement** eludes to the first movement in character and material, the difference lies in the almost chant-like statement by the solo viola which opens the movement. Throughout the movement, section soloists and tutti sections bring their own melancholy utterances to bare. In a way similar to how the third movement of Bartok's *Concerto for Orchestra* develops in a more individualistic way the material of the first movement, so Maconchy's third movement seems to offer a personal elegy on the arguments of the first movement.

The **fourth movement** is a devilishly difficult Finale for the orchestra—both technically and structurally. Maconchy again expands her signature knack for rhythmic and motivic development, taking the opening motifs and spinning them out into what sounds at times like canonical mayhem. Through the chaos, however, the motives begin to mold together, ultimately finishing in unison, with a final statement of the main material.

Editorial Notes

Maconchy's own hand was extraordinarily clean and precise, so the manuscript from which I worked (provided to me by Chester Music) was, for the most part, without great ambiguity. My sole goal in typesetting this score was to provide as clean a representation as possible of Maconchy's own hand. As such, I strove to transcribe not only the details of the score alone, but

also the manner in which Maconchy expressed those details. As previously observed, her hand was precise, but there are some peculiarities which may beg questions as to their originality. Performers can rest assured that any such deviations or additions to Maconchy's own hand (Ex. Movement III, Measure 26) have been bracketed and commented on within the score.

One such oddity lies in Maconchy's use of continuous Rehearsal Letters across all movements. This seems to be a habit of Maconchy in her multi-movement works, and—while calling out double rehearsal letters can be a bit cumbersome during rehearsals—the practice may offer a clue into Maconchy's overall structural conception of the work. In faithfulness to my initial objective, I forwent my own practical rehearsal considerations and maintained Maconchy's continuous rehearsal markings. I did, however, include measure numbers (beginning anew each movement). An unobtrusive addition to Maconchy's intention, it provides one more tool to performers in the preparation of the work.

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