Elisabeth Lutyens

* 9 July 1906 in London,
† 14 April 1983 in London,

composer, authoress

“Though devoid of a natural musical talent I feel I chose music as another form of my need for privacy. If I had chosen a visual art, I might have had Father breathing over my shoulder, if writing, well, as I have said, all Lyttons write, from Mary, professionally, even to me, as an amateur.”

(Elisabeth Lutyens. "A Goldfish Bowl", p. 10)

Profile

Elisabeth Lutyens is seen as the first female, British composer to use the twelve-note technique. Her compositional development was anything but straightforward and always endangered by financial and health problems. Her compositions were ignored in Great Britain for the longest time, which meant a perpetual fight against financial ruin for the mother of four children who depended on her income from compositions. She composed commission works for film and radio to counteract this. This tenacity earned her a certain recognition in Britain very late; yet her numerous works are hardly ever performed even today.

Cities an countries

Elisabeth Lutyens was born in London. At the age of 17 she studied in Paris for a few months. Following private travels to the centres of the theosophical movement, to Ehrwald (Austria), Trento (Italy), various cities in India and Sydney (Australia) in her twenties, Lutyens lived and worked in London for the rest of her life, except for a brief stay in Newcastle during World War II.

Biography

As the fourth of five children of architect Sir Edwin Landseer Lutyens and his wife Lady Emily (nee Lytton) Elisabeth Lutyens was born into a wealthy family. Family life was marked by conflicts between the parents. Her father was the architect of downtown Delhi and her mother the daughter of India’s vice king and a lady in waiting to Queen Victoria. Early on, Elisabeth Lutyens decided to become a composer. Firstly, to gain her mother’s attention and, secondly, because this was an area where she didn’t have to expect competition within her own family, as she later writes in her autobiography. She received violin-, piano- and composing lessons. Her aunt Constance Lytton, a talented pianist, whose tutor had been instructed by one of Clara Schumann’s students, and a suffragette supported her by introducing her to the works of Robert Schumann. At the age of 15 Lutyens created her first attempts at chamber music and a year later the concept for a first ballet.

In winter 1922/23 Lutyens lived in Paris for three months with young theosophical composer Marcelle de Manziarly, who had been trained by Nadia Boulanger, and attended courses in harmonics, counterpoint and solfège at the École Normale de Musique. This was probably arranged by her mother who had joined the theosophical movement in 1910. Marcelle de Manziarly introduced Elisabeth Lutyens to the works of Claude Debussy and most importantly Igor Stravinsky who she continued to admire all her life. She also met musicologist, composer and organist Antoine Geoffroy-Dechaume in Paris. He sparked her interest in the works of Girolamo Frescobaldi and Henry Purcell. Based on her study of these works she later developed the composition of equal notes series - according to Lutyens herself, independently (see Lutyens, "A Goldfish Bowl" p. 270; Laurel Parsons, “Early Music and the Ambivalent Origins of Elisabeth Lutyens’s
Modernism”, where the authoress demonstrates Purcell’s specific influence on Lutyens’ atonal and dodecaphonic music.) During the months in Paris Lutyens shows first signs of depression that would later lead to several mental breakdowns.

Lutyens took up private composing lessons with theosophical composer John Foulds in London in 1923 after a journey to theosophical centre Ehrwald, Austria, together with her mother. However, she discontinued these lessons shortly afterwards to join her mother and Jiddu Krishnamurti, who had been chosen as “global tutor” by the theosophical society and had partly grown up within her family, in a journey to Italy (Trento), various Indian cities and to Australia (Sydney). Although the theosophical philosophy and her personal relationship with Krishnamurti increasingly strained her, she joined the society in May 1925 before returning from Sydney to London.

Back in London she radically turned her back on theosophy and all religion. In 1926 she began composing studies at London’s renowned Royal College of Music, where she was tutored by Harold Darke (composing) and Ernest Tomlinson (viola). Lutyens was not allowed to study composing with the famous professors Ralph Vaughan Williams or John Ireland due to tensions with the Royal College of Music’s director Hugh Allen, who followed the so-called English Musical Renaissance. During her studies she met fellow-student and life-long confidant, composer Dorothy Gow. In contrast to her fellow composing students at the Royal College of Music (Elizabeth Maconchy, Dorothy Gow, Imogen Holst and Grace Williams) Elisabeth Lutyens never received a commendation or won any prizes for her compositions during her studies. The constantly deteriorating relationship with her mother during this time resulted in returning depressions.

In 1929 Lutyens met singer Ian Glennie who she married in 1933. In 1931 she founded the Macnaghten-Lemare-concerts in London together with conductor Iris Lemare and violinist Anne Macnaghten that would exist for several decades. The concerts’ aim was to improve performance conditions for the works of young male and female composers. They became an institution in London’s cultural life and Elisabeth Lutyens heard many of her works for the first time during these concerts.

The performance of the ballet “The Birthday of the Infanta”, which was composed in the the style of Stravinsky’s “Petrushka”, by the Camargo Society (1932) marked the first time that Elisabeth Lutyens’ work received public attention. The work was later withdrawn due to doubts regarding its quality. Her first son Sebastian was born in 1934. During the following years Lutyens worked for the Macnaghten-Lemare-concerts and gave birth to twins before meeting 18 years older conductor and former BBC producer Edward Clark in 1938. He was one of Schönberg’s students and had made it his mission to introduce the British audience to contemporary continental music. She separated from Ian Glennie but he didn’t agree to a divorce until several years later. In 1939 and 1940 Lutyens composed “Chamber Concerto” I and II as her first dodecaphonic works. Due to the insecure war situation she moved in with her sister Ursula’s family in Newcastle (North England) with her children in 1940. Tensions between the families led to quarrel soon afterwards and Lutyens returned to London. Her tonal style work “Three Pieces for Orchestra” op. 7 premiered in London at the Promenade Concerts on the evening of the bombing of London by German troops. This remained the only larger performance of one of her works for a long time. Her only child by Edward Clark, Conrad, was born in 1941.

Great financial concerns as well as hunger, war and illness kept Elisabeth Lutyens from composing during 1940 and 1941. In 1943 she returned to London after further stays in the countryside with her children, while signs of her later alcohol problems were already piling up. From 1944 onwards she took commissions for copy work and film musics having become the sole provider for her four children and husband. Although Lutyens herself always pedantically distinguished between her “serious music” and her “wage labour”, the work on film music most likely contributed significantly to the development of her later style. She sent her children to relatives and established separate flats for Clark and herself so that she could work undisturbed. She met some of the most important figures of modern London life with Constant Lambert, Francis Bacon and Dylan Thomas. Frequent visits to pubs in London’s Bloomsbury area contributed to her alcohol addiction. In 1946, pressured by Edward Clark and her mother, she decided to abort her fifth child. Two years later she had a mental and physical breakdown that forced her to spend several months in a mental health institution. It wasn’t until 1951 that she managed to regain control of her alcohol addiction, having endured four days of extreme withdrawal. However, the increasing social isolation and lack of recognition for her “serious music” led her to take on
more and more commissions for films, advertising and radio.

In 1957 she started to give private lessons, which she continued for several years and that improved her financial situation a little. She felt a special connection with young outsiders who, like her, struggled with the musical establishment. Amongst her students and protégés were Malcolm Williamson and Richard Rodney Bennett, and she supported some members of the Manchester Group (Harrison Birtwistle, Alexander Goehr and Peter Maxwell Davies) financially and with advice. At the same time she damaged her relationship with the BBC by holding the BBC responsible for her husband’s failed career in the music industry. In addition, she became involved in a legal battle against Benjamin Frankel, who was closely linked to the BBC; she took sides with her husband Edward Clark with anti-semitic remarks that became more and more frequent towards the end of her life.

In 1962 Lutyens received £350 prize money from the Phoenix Trust for her contributions to music. Edward Clark died during the same year. His role as confidant and critic during her career cannot be overestimated. Following these events she began to look into subjects like death and eternity and further developed her composing language by giving more weight to the thematic design, while dodecaphonic thinking moved to the background. In 1969 she was made “Commanders of the Order of the British Empire” (CBE) and received London’s Lord Mayor’s Midsummer Award (prize money for artists whose significant contributions have not previously been sufficiently commended). In the same year she founded her own publishing house, Olivan Press, following a dispute with her previous publisher Schott. She signed over Olivan Press to Universal Music in 1974 and Universal discontinued Olivan Press, integrating Lutyens’ work into their own catalogue. Although she received a total of eight composing commissions from the BBC between 1962 and 1971, her works were rarely performed outside London. Her autobiography “A Goldfish Bowl” was published in 1972 and she allows profound insights into her life and work as a London composer. In 1976 she became “composer-in-residence” at York University. About the same time her earnings from years of work for film and radio increased significantly so that she could live without financial support from friends and family for the first time.

At the beginning of the 1970s Elisabeth Lutyens started drinking again and became addicted to tablets as well. (She regularly took anti-depressants, tranquillisers, barbiturates and steroids.) Towards the end of the 1970s, suffering from illness and alcohol addiction, Elisabeth Lutyens composed music only very rarely and most of the works created during this phase are short. Following her thirteenth string quartet’s premiere in March 1983, which she attended in a wheelchair, Elisabeth Lutyens died in the early hours of 14th April of a stroke in her north London flat in 17 King Henry’s Road.

Appreciation

Elisabeth Lutyens is seen as the first female, British composer to use the twelve-note composition. According to Lutyens’ own words she developed her own serialism technique independently of the Schönbergian serial-school based on her studies of Henry Purcell’s “String Fantasias”; her acquaintance with Edward Clark probably was another significant contributing factor. Additional strong influences were the music of Igor Stravinsky and Claude Debussy’s early years. Her work includes most genres of European artistic music but she did not write symphonies as such. It is noticeable that she rarely edited her own work. A major part of her oeuvre are commissions for film, radio, television and theatre, although she never recognised these as “artistic music” (in an emphatic sense). Her attitude towards film music became known in a self-ironic quote. Asked to produce such music she replied: “Do you want it good or do you want it Thursday?”

Her stylistic development went from late romantic style music, via experiments with neoclassicism, to her own independent use of dodecaphonism. The chamber concert Nr. 1 (1939) is regarded a turning point of her career, as this is the first time she used a complete twelve-note series. In the 1946 cantata “O Saisons! O Châteaux!” Lutyens started to find her own style in this technique she knew perfectly by then. “Quincunx” (1957) marks a climax of balance and equilibrium in a formal sense. During the 1960s and 1970s Lutyens increasingly wrote vocal music and, after several short operas, crowned her work with the operas “The Numbered” (1965-67, not premiered), “Time Off? Not a Ghost of a Chance!” (1967-68, WP Sadler’s Wells London 1972) and “Isis and Osiris” (1969-70, WP Morley College London 1976).

As tutor and supporter of young composers Elisabeth Lu-
Lutyens was particularly concerned with her students’ independent development. She was always available to her students and protégés with practical advice, for example her contacts to influential persons or financial support.

**Reception**

Elisabeth Lutyens lacked the recognition befitting her work for the longest time. The British public took an interest in her dodecaphonic works only after World War II. This increased during the 1960s due to a sparked interest in serialization. Elisabeth Lutyens, who very early had worked with note serials and pitch classes but never composed serially, went from having the unthankful role of a pioneer into the compositional background when compared to younger composers. Her works are mostly unknown in continental Europe - a fate she shares with a great number of British composers.

Hardly any of her works were performed more than once and, especially pre-1970, it is largely due to her devoted contacts within the artistic scene and a relatively small community of musical modernists in London that her works were performed at all. Although she had a few bigger successes with performances at the “Promenade Concerts”, these could not increase her popularity longterm. This is probably due to the fact that her relationship with the BBC was strained over a long period. The rarity of performances persists even today, although some works for small instrumentation have been recorded.

**Research**

Current scientific research approaches Lutyens’ work by considering her modernism and her role as composer in the context of contemporary twentieth century composers. Her extraordinarily extensive oeuvre for film and radio has been forgotten and awaits rediscovery.

Elisabeth Lutyens’ musical manuscripts (including unpublished, questionable or undated works) as well as letters are kept in the British Library, London (Sigel GB-Lbl, http://catalogue.bl.uk [catalogue search], see indices in the material collection that have been included with kind permission by the British Library) The British Library’s Sound Archive also holds recordings of Lutyens’ works.

**Need for Research**

Only few works have been analysed. However, it is noticeable that the influences of old music on her composing technique were more varied than previously assumed. A substantial and comparative analysis of her work would therefore be advisable, as is research into her contacts to contemporary London artists, writers and painters. A critical classification of her work into British musical modernism is also of interest. Last but not least, analysis of her multi-faceted film and radio music, that most likely influenced her style strongly, is completely outstanding.

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