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Composing against the tide

Early 20th Century Australian Women Composers and their piano music

As any swimmer or kayaker knows, trying to compete against the current takes an enormous amount of perseverance and determination to continue the forward momentum and to ultimately achieve your goal. Undertaking any task that goes against tradition takes that same amount of perseverance and determination. To be a successful composer, one who is published, performed and recognised – to say nothing of actually earning a living, is an ambition that competes against the norm. One could say that to be a woman and born in the early part of the twentieth century and to hold the ambition of becoming a professional composer was nothing short of foolhardy. Almost completely mad. In fact people did say that. Despite the many challenges there were a number of highly significant composers born during the period 1860-1915 who lived throughout the whole of the twentieth century and whose contributions to the development of Australian music were enormous and long-standing. Many of these composers were women.

My current research project is to discover which Australian women composers were born into this time frame, looking mainly at those composers who wrote piano music, to place them into a musical and historical context, to publish – or republish – and record their compositions for solo piano and to bring both the composers and their music into public awareness. This paper will focus on the difficulties faced not only by me in trying to achieve these goals but by the composers themselves who struggled against many obstacles to achieve any measure of success in their chosen field.

In my research I have had to limit the composers that are being discussed to those who reached a certain notoriety due to having had scores published or having had some significance in performance. There could be many others whose works are lost forever. Even some of the important composers that I have rediscovered have lost early works due to the fact that the scores were always only in manuscript form and with no photocopies, often one copy existed, easily misplaced.

The composers of piano music born into this time frame include the better-known Peggy Glanville-Hicks, Margaret Sutherland, Dulcie Holland, Miriam Hyde and Mirrie Hill, the lesser-known Meta Overman, Marjorie Hesse, Linda Phillips, Esther Rofe and Phyllis Batchelor and the almost completely unknown and forgotten Mona McBurney, Una Bourne, May Brahe, Katherine (Kitty) Parker/ Eisdell, Vera Buck, Iris de Cairos Rego, Josephine Bell, Ruby Davy, Esther Kahn and Florence Donaldson Ewart. Many compositions of these composers were published and have been collected by the National Library or were donated by estate holders to other libraries around the country. As a great deal of the repertoire written in the early twentieth century in Australia was for voice many of their songs have been published primarily and then the piano music has been listed as also existing or having existed. Many of these composers possessed great longevity and lived for almost the entire twentieth century dying at very mature ages. In the case of Linda Phillips, 101, Miriam Hyde, Esther Khan, Josephine Bell and Esther Rofe into their nineties and Phyllis Batchelor, Dulcie Holland and Una Bourne into their eighties. The influences that they absorbed from musical trends in the Twentieth Century and that they in turn could pass on through their music to performers and students were enormous.

The composers Miriam Hyde, Dulcie Holland, Mirrie Hill, Josephine Bell and Marjorie Hesse were all educators, performing the role of piano teachers and examiners for the AMEB. A great deal of the piano repertoire they wrote was written with students of various levels in mind. The repertoire had a mainly pedagogical purpose, often even exploiting a particular technical or musical difficulty with the aim of improving the performance of that particular difficulty. The titles were aimed at amusing or attracting children to encourage them to play those pieces and published with colourful title pages. Although this frequently ensured publication and a certain notoriety it had the opposing benefit of having the composers labelled as miniaturists and their music as unworthy and not to be taken seriously. They were labelled as composers who only composed for children. Not merely those pieces intended for children but their entire collection of works came under the same umbrella of scrutiny. Mirrie Hill wrote over 500 works including symphonic, choral and chamber works as well as many

compositions for piano, most of which were published in her lifetime. She has almost always carried the title “miniaturist”. She also stood under the shadow of her more famous husband, Alfred Hill, always referring to herself as Alfred Hill’s wife¹ when introducing herself. Mirrie Hill had been one of the first students to start at the Conservatorium in Sydney when it opened its doors to students on 6th March, 1916², and was afterward a teacher of harmony and counterpoint at the Conservatorium for almost 40 years numbering Dulcie Holland and Marjorie Hesse among her students. In one of the few interviews she gave about her life as a composer she talked about the cosy music room where Alfred would sit to compose with a view of the harbour³ and a warm fireplace in winter while she sat at the kitchen table with a hot water bottle on her knee so as to be able to write while she was uncomfortable and cold.⁴ While her husband was alive Hill composed very little as she had to teach and look after her famous husband and even after his death a great deal of her time was spent collecting and arranging for the preservation of his music.

Miriam Hyde is perhaps one of the better known composers who lived from 1913 until 2005. Although many of her compositions for piano are aimed at children some of her more difficult works are technically challenging, interesting harmonically and are excellent examples of piano writing of the twentieth century. For example the “Study in Blue, White and Gold” (1969) is a difficult work in which the characters and colours of the three keys B major, C major and E major are superimposed over each other. Many of her works have descriptive titles where the imagery inherent in the compositions is apt and well-crafted. Her oeuvre includes many sonatas, concert studies, rhapsodies and fantasies as well as miniatures for children. The compositions are always pianistic, demonstrating a real ability to write what is playable at the level of performer for which they are intended. Hyde was a great pianist herself, performing until her final protracted illness and death. I personally remember hearing her speak and perform to a large

¹ Letter to Percy Grainger in which Mirrie Hill intends to present to Grainger some of her compositions. She uses her relationship as Alfred Hill’s wife to gain any credibility.

² Collins, Diane. *Sounds from the Stables*. Allan & Unwin, 2001.

³ The Hills lived for many years in Raglan Street, Mosman overlooking Sirius Cove.

⁴ Pearce, Rowena. *Rediscovering Mirrie Hill*. Masters Thesis, University of Melbourne. 2002.

audience in 2002 with coherence and charisma. Because she never embraced the “Avant Gard” style of the 50s and 60s or discarded the musical language of her traditional training in England with R. O. Morris and Gordon Jacob she was often treated as very old fashioned. Her 80th birthday celebrations in 1993 were marked by a tribute concert of her works in Adelaide and by recitals performed herself in Adelaide, Perth, Sydney and Ingham. In her Sydney recital she played the Liszt sonata in b minor and the Brahms sonata in f minor. The review of this concert in the Sydney Morning Herald expresses the incredulity of the reviewer, disparagingly referring to the audience as mostly members of the Music Teachers’ association, at actually enjoying the concert to the extent of giving Hyde a standing ovation. Perhaps playing the Liszt sonata in b minor was quite an ambitious quest for someone in their 80th year but surely that quest should be applauded and not an occasion for such condemnation on the part of the reviewer who certainly was not a performer of someone of Hyde’s calibre.

Hyde, certainly in terms of publication and recording, fared better than many of her contemporaries but this was probably due to the amount and quality of her compositions. Dulcie Holland (1913 -2000) born the same year also fared fairly well. The bulk of Holland’s works written for piano are pedagogical works and many have been published and still appear in AMEB publications and on the syllabus. Due to her association with the Australian Fellowship of Composers a great many of these have also been recorded.⁵ Her husband was Head of Music at an important private boys’ college in Sydney and this gave Holland opportunities for performance in addition to those AMEB works. Alan Bellhouse appears to have been a supportive spouse.

Not so fortunate was Margaret Sutherland (1897-1964) whose husband, Dr Norman Albiston, a psychiatrist thought any woman claiming to be a composer must be mentally ill.⁶ Sutherland wrote many important works and now is highly regarded as the matriarch of Australian Composition but her activities in this area were severely curtailed while she was married to Albiston and while her children were young when her role was seen to be primarily wife and mother. Her

⁵ Recorded on the Jade label.

⁶ From archival material held at the Australian Music Centre.

compositions were not adopted by the AMEB as readily as those of Hyde, Holland, Hesse or Hill and she experienced difficulty being published. There is the now relatively well-known anecdote of Sutherland sending her viola sonata to an English publisher with only with the name M. Sutherland attached. The publishers were very enthusiastic of the work until it was revealed that the “M” stood not for Michael or Martin but Margaret when the offer of publication was retracted.

Peggy Glanville-Hicks (1912-1990) worked tirelessly through the *Composer’s forum* in America to get the works of her contemporaries and her own published and performed. In many cases the performances of her operas cost her thousands of dollars and she had to work as composer, copyist, musical director, fundraiser to achieve some level of success.⁷ There are only three extant piano works remaining from Glanville-Hicks, the others completely lost.⁸ Of those three remaining works only one has been published.⁹

Glanville-Hicks achieved a certain amount of success during her time in America and Greece and has now after her death also achieved some significance in Australia, due in some part to her generous bequest of a house as part of a residential scholarship for composers, but on her return to Australia in the 1970s she was appalled at the lack of opportunity she found for publication and performance. It is also dismaying to discover when reading one of her many biographies that during her marriage to the composer Stanley Bate in the late 30s and 40s she was also relegated to the kitchen table to compose while Bate had the benefit of the cosy room complete with grand piano, despite her significance as a composer long outliving his. There are also reports of her being a victim to his drunken rages and sporting the scars of physical, mental as well as financial abuse.¹⁰

⁷ Murdoch, James. *Peggy Glanville Hicks. A Transposed Life*. p182-183. The opera “Nausicaa” cost something like \$91,981 to bring to fruition.

⁸ The early works would have been in manuscript form and most probably only ever existed in a single copy left in Melbourne in 1932.

⁹ The “Prelude for a Pensive Pupil” appears in several publications of works composed by Twentieth century female composers, now all presently out of print.

¹⁰ Murdoch, James. *Peggy Glanville Hicks. A Transposed Life*.

Meta Overman,(1907- 1993) the Dutch-born composer who immigrated to Australia in 1951 also suffered similar physical abuse at the hands of her first husband, Frank Russcher, who beat her often so that she had to seek refuge. This did not stop her composing and during the period of her first marriage wrote a number of her highly significant compositions including the opera *Psyche* which she claimed was her best work and from which several piano compositions have been extracted.¹¹ Overman wrote seventeen large scale, often multi-movement works for piano, of which only two were published in her life time.¹²

Mona McBurney (1862-1932) was the first woman to receive a Mus.Bac. in Australia from the Melbourne University where she studied with George Marshall Hall. She was a highly influential teacher and taught among others Margaret Sutherland and May Brahe. Her main work for the piano was a concerto-style work called *The Northern Ballad* based on a Nordic legend and premiered to great acclaim with fellow composer and piano prodigy, Una Bourne, the soloist and a women's orchestra at a Women's Exhibition in 1907. There are also three short works for piano which have been attributed to her and are have never been published. In the reviews about her compositions existing in the archival material she presents well – better in fact than do some of her male counterparts.¹³

Una Bourne (1882-1974) was among other things, Dame Nellie Melba's preferred accompanist and fellow travelling artist. She often worked as an accompanist as well as solo performer, as evidenced by her many reviews, for some of the top singers and instrumentalists of the day. Her compositional output includes several short one movement piano works which have been retained by the National Library and the State Library of Victoria.

Esther Rofe was a 'narrative' composer who wrote seven ballets, two of which (*Sea Legend* and *Terra Australis*) were performed by the Borovonsky Ballet Company. Her output for piano is small, only seven works, of which one has not

¹¹ The "Three Dances" (1955) for piano are taken from the opera *Psyche*.

¹² All of Overman's piano music (seventeen works) were published by Wirripang, complete with CD recordings, in 2014.

¹³ From the archives held by the Grainger museum in Melbourne. There are a number of carefully retained memorabilia. One of the reviewers is somewhat scathing of the work of Alfred Hill but complimentary of McBurney's performance and composition.

been located, and also of which only one has been published.¹⁴ Rofe was so despondent by the lack of performance and publication opportunities that she wrote very little for many years. During that time she was primarily employed as an arranger for Colgate-Palmolive and apart from the necessity of having to arrange music extremely quickly she often had to arrange music in a “swing” style which she found foreign to her temperament and in direct opposition to the style she used when composing. She had studied in England at the same time and with the same teachers as Miriam Hyde and Peggy Glanville Hicks as well as studying with Fritz Hart in Melbourne at the same time as these composers. Fritz Hart being one of those teachers for whom the gender of the student had no place in any discussion.

Linda Phillips (1899-2001) earned her living after the early death of her husband as music critic for the Sun newspaper in Melbourne. In this role, as in her role as composer, she experienced often blatant sexism, by sub-editors of the paper asking her why she was not at home tending the children and doing the washing. In her unpublished autobiography she writes at her frustration of lack of performance and publication opportunities for composers in general and women composers in particular. Most of her output consists of art songs but she also wrote many chamber works and works for piano.

If one searches the newspaper articles in Trove using the name Esther Kahn you will get something like 1500 possibilities. Kahn was a child prodigy who came from an extremely musical family, immigrating to Australia when she was a young child. During her lifetime she wrote many works for piano solo – mostly short one movement works and approximately 200 songs. She was responsible for introducing music therapy as a discipline and established the Australian branch of the International Association of Music Therapeutics in the 1920s. Kahn spent a great deal of her time travelling to hospitals and homes where patients who were being treated for mental illnesses were used in the experimentation of different compositions that had a calming effect on the inmates. The composer Esther Kahn today is almost entirely forgotten and her works long out of print.

¹⁴ “Pierrette at Court” published in 1938 by Graham Gill publications.

May Brahe wrote songs that sold over a million copies. Her most famous, *Bless this House*, the favourite song of President Roosevelt and which was sung at his funeral and *I Passed by Your Window* were two of the best known. Brahe made so much money from her songs that she was able to provide for her family, subsidizing private education for four children and property in Potts Point, Sydney. She was often criticized for the popularity of her songs, with critics saying they were too popular to be taken as serious works. Brahe also was forced to compose at the kitchen sink and was interrupted from her work by having to do the family shopping and cleaning.

So many of the composers that have been included in this project had to fight against obstacles that were placed in front of them. Social expectations, gender inequality, time restraints were so much more of a burden than for those of their male counterparts. Although it was the norm for young ladies in the early twentieth century to learn an instrument, to sing or to be able to entertain after a dinner party, to have the time and possibilities to develop enough talent to fulfil the aim of being professional was extremely difficult. It was of course expected that women would marry and bear children and the time restraints that these activities held made it very difficult to develop creativity. All Australian composers, male and female, suffered from the expectation that what came from Australia was not as good as something from Europe or America and had difficulty in getting publication but it was so much harder for the female composers. Looking at the publication history of many of these composers it is possible to observe that the main success came through the publication of pedagogical works or songs particularly in those cases where the works were utilized in an exam situation by e.g. the AMEB or like-minded organizations. Almost every composer I researched had to have works published under pseudonyms. Mostly the pseudonyms they adopted were male names. This was done not only for the obvious reason that male composers were more likely to receive publication options but also because publishers had the dim view that the public did not want to see the same name appearing on too many different compositions. May Brahe was published using nine pseudonyms and all of the other composers using several.

Recently there has been a resurgence of interest and a number of theses and in-depth studies of some of these composers including Peggy Glanville-Hicks, Dulcie Holland, Miriam Hyde, Esther Rofe, Linda Phillips, Meta Overman and Margaret Sutherland have been forthcoming. Some of the interest generated has extended itself to re-publications and recordings of scores. Many of the composers who wrote piano music were not primarily composers of this idiom and so whilst their songs or their orchestral music has risen to prominence their piano music has been mentioned merely in passing by other researchers. All of the composers mentioned were in fact pianists and when writing for the piano, even in the sometimes small amounts of music produced, demonstrated a good understanding of the possible textures available, technique needed and other pianistic criteria. The fact that the majority of the composers would have also been teachers of piano and worked as accompanists is an important feature of their legacy of influence.

The main difficulty in such a research project as this is maintaining a level of comprehensiveness. Any composer who has a record of having written piano music, who was born into the described time frame and was obviously female was included. There could of course been several who were omitted merely because there is no remaining copies of any piano music. In some sources composers are listed as “composers of works for orchestra, voice and piano” but there is no information concerning any compositions for that instrument and no indication of where they may be found. In other cases it is obvious that more works have been written than those which are currently extant. The scores could still be languishing in someone’s attic in a mouldy manuscript form but are more likely to have disappeared altogether and this is frustrating knowing that there is a lack of completeness in the project. More frustrating is when there is evidence of the scores held by libraries or publishing houses but due to copyright restrictions the whole score is not made public or prohibited from republication, despite the present license holder never having the intention of republication.

In my research of this project to date I been assisted by some very informed people – mainly specialist music librarians at various libraries in Australia. Chiefly among these are Marie Chellos at the Sydney Conservatorium library, Judith

Foster at the Australian Music Centre library, Jacqueline Waylen at the Monash University Library and Linda Papa at the University of Western Australia music library. Without the help and assistance of these amazing people I would not have found many of the resources that have helped with the research. This project will have several final outcomes. There will be a published anthology of examples of piano compositions by each of the composers. Most likely this will be in three volumes of music each volume containing a recording of the works. The anthology will be published by Wirripang, home of Australian composers. There will also be a written publication discussing each composer and her output of piano repertoire.

The female composers who have been researched in this project were all composing against the tide of tradition, and had to prove perseverance and determination to gain as much recognition as they did. The intention of the project is to revive the recognition and create a situation where there is a resurgence of interest in them and their piano music.

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