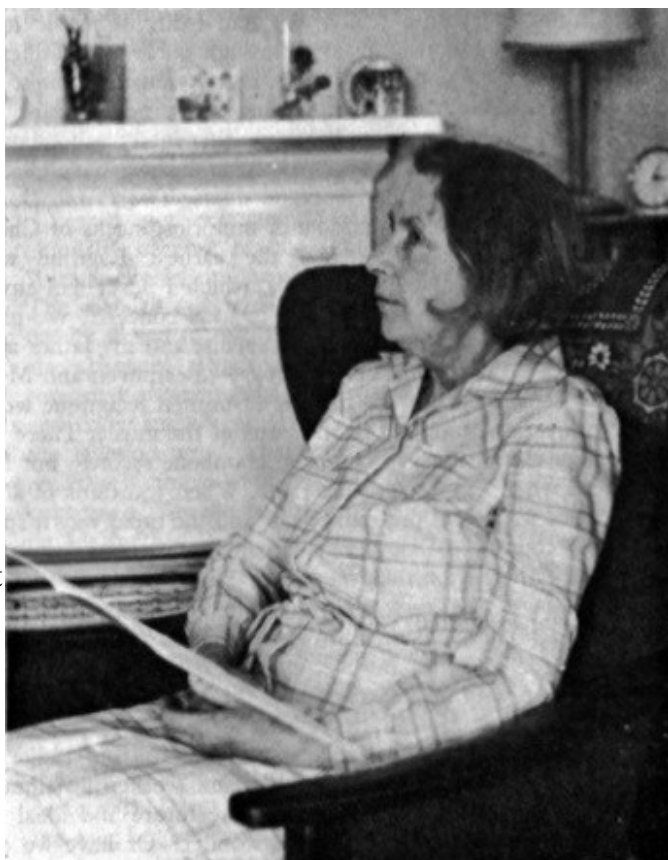


VIEWS AND REVISIONS

The Composer Grace Williams talks to A. J. Heward Rees

AJHR: Having recently celebrated your seventieth birthday, are you conscious of being something of a “*doyenne*” among composers?

GW: Well David Wynne is of course the senior Welsh composer, but I'm not sure that I can claim the position even among British women composers either! You see Elisabeth Lutyens is a few months younger, but Piaulx Rainier is older, and so I think is Elizabeth Poston, then a whole lot of us, including Elizabeth Maconchy and Imogen Holst come together. It's very strange, you know; most of us arrived at the Royal College of Music at the same time without known anything at all about each other, some as we did from quite different background (some quite “upper crust”, and myself from Wales), and most of us are still at it. Phyllis Tate is a few years younger, (she was at the Academy) and sprang up as a composer quite on her own. There are lots of women composers coming up now of course, but it was very unusual that this should have happened in the late twenties. It isn't as if we



influence each other, or had even heard of each other previously. There was absolutely no prejudice against us at the College, and there was no prejudice here in Wales either: remember there had already been Morfydd Owen by the time I came along, and that perhaps made it easier for me. She was so charming that everybody fell for her, and allowed her anything she wanted, simply because she was Morfydd Owen! I never met her; she died two years before the Barry National Eisteddfod when I was fourteen, and I well remember her name being inscribed there, and an orchestral work of hers, *Variations of “Y Fwyalchen”*, played by the LSO. She seems to have had a most extraordinary life. I met her father, and some people who knew her, including my teachers at Cardiff University.

AJHR: Did you feel you were banding together at all, as women composers in London?

GW: Oh yes! We didn't know Elisabeth Lutyens so well because she had a different teacher; the rest of us were Vaughan Williams's pupils. He always arranged for us to have play-throughs and to discuss our work with each other. I got to know Elisabeth Lutyens afterwards because we were all concerned with the Mcnaghten Concerts which presented contemporary music in London.

AJHR: Then you went to Vienna for a year to study with Egon Wellesz.

GW: Yes, I had a travelling scholarship from the RCM.

AJHR: Tell me something about him as a teacher.

GW: Well he was marvellous, and had so different an approach from Vaughan Williams, who was

the sort of personality to whom you could only take your best music. Vaughan Williams knew his limitations as a teacher though; he would say “I know there's something wrong, but I can't put my finger on it”, but Egon Wellesz could. He had a way of saying “It begins to get weak at this point, so you will scrap from here onwards and re-write”. But then he'd been a pupil of Schoenberg, whose method this was, you see, but he hardly ever mentioned his name to me because he had ceased to follow the Schoenberg line by the time I came to him.

AJHR: You were aware of the Schoenbergian “shadow” in Vienna however?

GW: Yes, I went to a concert once where I heard Webern's music for the first time, and I must confess I nearly had hysterics! It was an audience full of terribly serious-faced people in a very small hall, and I was alone. The music consisted of sudden tiny notes and long silences, and, you know, any sort of funny sounds of even someone singing out of tune always used to send me into a spontaneous fit of the giggles – a great source of embarrassment. But it was all so incredibly strange. Music for me has got to flow, because I have been brought up in the singing tradition, and everything I've ever written (though I haven't had much commissioned work for voices), even the kind of string music I write, is basically melodic and onward-moving. That is what disconcerts me about the music written by so many young people today, – it doesn't move ahead, it's so static in style, without the feeling of physical youthfulness or energy. It makes me restless even at my age, – it's so foreign to what I observed to be typical of young people themselves. On the other hand I can quite see that certain current experiments have to be made: the exploration of electronic sound for example. Most of our tradition instruments are machines of a kind, except the human voice, which, again, is transformed when subjected to professional training.

AJHR: Let's go back to your early years. How soon did you decide you were going to be a composer?

GW: I don't know. You see it all began with extemporization. I used to make things up at the piano. My father didn't believe in piano exams which would confine me to the special syllabus, which was a good thing in a way; but of course I never really developed a good piano technique.

AJHR: What kind of music did you hear as a child?

GW: Practically everything really. We had loads of music in the house, and I used to play my way through the lot. My father had a boys' choir, and he taught them rather unusual things, even *The Rhinemaidens' Song*, for instance. I've never heard it so cleanly and sweetly sung as by those elementary schoolboys. It was quite unerotic of course ... it would never have ensnared Alberich! At home we had operatic duets, *The Prima Donna's Album*, Tchaikovsky's songs, lots of oratorios, stacks of Chopin, Beethoven and Bach. We had the earliest Ragtime which fascinated me, and of course ballads, which I never had any use for, though I had to listen to them in local concerts. We played chamber music, with my brother as 'cellist and my father at the piano (I played the violin very badly), – Beethoven and Mozart trios and sonatas and so on. In spite of limited technique we had an uncanny way of getting to the heart of the music. There were concerts at Cardiff, and of course gramophone records, but I was seventeen when I first heard the radio. When you think of all the great music written in pre-radio days, and the rapid way it spread from one country to another, it's really rather amazing.

AJHR: What rather astonishes me is the achievement of the great orchestrators of the past, who, compared with us, must rarely have heard a complete or first-rate orchestral performance.

GW: Yes indeed. Think of Berlioz, and the defective orchestras he had to put up with on his travels, – the greatest orchestrator of them all, in my opinion. I always used to say that he was the one

composer who would invariably sound clear on old radio sets. Think too of Bach, with the smaller and weaker instrumental resources he had. Did he simply imagine future and ideal conditions for performing the music, I wonder? Or have we done something additional and strange to their music, beyond their wildest dreams? The passage of time does seem to alter things and expand them in an astonishing way, I think. A few years ago I wrote my *Missa Cambrensis*, and beforehand I read the Gospels straight through. It struck me forcibly that so much has been added to their interpretation, inevitably, through the centuries. It struck me, too, that Christ was the most powerful debunker.

AJHR: You studied music at Barry County School, as it then was?

GW: Yes. My father knew the headmistress, and insisted that I should be taken through the usual exams, and he wanted me to try for scholarships and so on. The Geography mistress saw me through what is now called O level music, and the headmistress, who was musically inclined, secured the appointment of the first full-time music-mistress, who now lives in Aberystwyth, in her 80s, (Rhyda Basil-Williams), and I still correspond with her. She came straight from college at Aberystwyth in Walford Davies's time, and took me through "Higher" as it was then called, and was a splendid teacher.

AJHR: Following school, you were bent on a musical career, presumably.

GW: Yes, I got scholarships and went to Cardiff University, obviously, because no-one thought of my going anywhere else. With a scholarship one was expected to follow it up with a degree. The social life was marvellous there, but the B.Mus. course was deadly. I had to take two other subjects, and I took English and also French, which I enjoyed very much. Otherwise work consisted of writing an endless succession of fugues, and minuets and trios, and so on. If one wrote anything off the beaten track the reaction was "what will the external examiner say?", so I really was imprisoned in that place as far as composing was concerned. Yet the professor, David Evans, felt that I should go on for further study (he remembered Morfydd Owen you see), and suggested that I should go to the Royal College. So I had my scholarship extended, and took an entrance exam, and went to study with Vaughan Williams. At the end of my first year at the RCM I got an internal scholarship, and did a bit of teaching as well, and carried on with composition.

AJHR: Then Vienna followed: and afterwards?

GW: I taught in London as a part-timer in two jobs, one at a training college, and the other at the Camden School (which I preferred). I was evacuated with the school at the outbreak of the war, but we came back to London for the last two years of it, when people thought the bombing was over (but of course it wasn't).

AJHR: Where were you evacuated to?

GW: Lincolnshire, believe it or not, and bitterly cold it was too. Actually it was very sad for me, because we should have gone to Bedford, where the BBC Symphony Orchestra was based during the war, and everything had been arranged. However we had a very independent-minded headmistress, and when we had been waiting for some time for our special train she got very impatient – she didn't like taking orders in any case. As a result, when an empty train came in she ordered us all on board, so we landed in Uppingham, where they were expecting mothers and babies. From there we moved to Grantham, where I was lucky to be billeted with business people who were out all day and let me have the use of their grand piano, and it was there I wrote my *Sinfonia Concertante* for piano and orchestra, as well as my First Symphony. Of course there was my part-time teaching to attend to, and at the school I produced operas: *Hansel and Gretel* and *The Bartered Bride*, because the head thought it was very good for morale. When Grantham got too

dangerous we were moved on to Stamford, and thereafter back to London.

AJHR: You enjoyed teaching?

GW: Well I did, but then I was merely the part-timer who taught singing, remember. I could sing, and make them sing too. I do feel that singing is the Cinderella of music-teaching in schools throughout Britain. You know of course how things have developed recently, with percussion instruments and guitars, and how a lot more theory is taught, but I still maintain that it is through singing that you develop the ear. On the instrument the note is there for you. It's a miracle to me how people sing in tune: you can't see your vocal cords at all. I believe in teaching singing, not through solfa, but staff notation, using the solfa names; and I do believe in voice exercises. I had the girls up on their feet to run through the exercises, and they enjoyed them. It was a peculiar school, in that one had to provide music for so many functions. There was prize-giving in the autumn term in which the whole school was involved as well as the choir, then in the middle term there was Founder's Day, with many hymns and chants to prepare as well as full-scale work. At the end of the summer term we had fête days with evening entertainments, all involving music, and including an adaptation (by me) of a G. & S. opera prepared by the Upper Sixth in the fortnight after their A level exams. I had to work at a cracking pace, but I had no marking or exam work to cope with, and this suited me very well, because away from the place I could do my own writing.

AJHR: Was any of your writing geared to school needs?

GW: No. I kept it apart. I don't know whether I was right in doing so, but I had to feel that my composing life was quite different. I didn't even write a school song, – perhaps I should have. I don't think other composers would have had the same attitude, but for me – and this is a purely personal thing – it had to be a life absolutely apart. It was marvellous in other ways, because I had the experience of teaching other people's music, and working on operas too. It may sound very silly, but when I came to write my own opera *The Parlour*, it was a tremendous help, since I had worked with a member of staff who was a very gifted producer, and I learnt so much about stage-craft. Even though we had to make our own costumes and props the standard was rather high, I think.

AJHR: Were you attracted to the theatre in your early years?

GW: Oh yes, as a child I went a great deal to plays, and to hear the opera-companies who used to come to Cardiff; as a family we used to go regularly to the Saturday matinees. I always loved the theatre: I belong somehow. We had marvellous Shakespeare productions at our school, quite the best thing that was done there, I'm sure.

AJHR: Let me spring the obvious question on you: can we hope for another opera?

GW: Oh no, of course not, I'm far too old now for the sheer physical labour involved.

AJHR: Really? Not even a one-acter, you couldn't possibly be tempted?

GW: Oh yes, easily, but it would have to be in another incarnation! *The Parlour*, did work as an opera I think, but people simply did not come to it, although it got very good notices.

AJHR: I'm convinced the audiences would turn up nowadays, as the operatic climate has changed enormously in Wales in the last few years. During those teaching years were you writing large-scale works?

GW: Yes. Just before the war I wrote some things which I still think are good. For instances there's

a short chorus: *Gogoneddawg Arglwydd* – never performed in Wales – and a setting of the *Magnificat* (which I called *The Song of Mary*) for soprano and chamber orchestra.

AJHR: Were these commissions?

GW: No, indeed; I hadn't started to get commissions in those days, but I managed somehow, financially; I've always been good at budgeting and that sort of thing. I'd had one commission, just before the war, I remember, from BBC Wales. You know it was a marvellous sensation, simply being asked to write something; someone wanting your music. Once I got going on it the music absolutely haunted me. I went about London, and even when travelling on the underground the music was still there in my head. Such was the elation of having a commission, the ideas flowed freely.

AJHR: After the war you took the plunge into independence and freelance work. Was this because you were determined to be entirely free to write?

GW: No, not at all. Things just happened that way. I wasn't very well at the end of the war, and suddenly I cracked up. The cost of living had gone up and I realised that I should have to work full-time at the school to make ends meet. I was offered a full-time post at the training college, but I didn't want that either, because I knew I should never have time for composing. So I came home to freelance, and here I've been ever since. Once I had taken the plunge I didn't worry. Mind you I had nobody dependent on me: a married man with a family, for instance, couldn't have done it. Later on, it became more difficult, with elderly parents and a house to look after, but I had some domestic help, and BBC Wales were marvellous in giving me work to do.

AJHR: If you hadn't relied on commissions, do you think you would have written at all differently?

GW: No, not at all. I would have written for different ensembles, perhaps, and I would certainly have written far more for voices. It's been so hard – and still is – to get songs performed in Wales. Of course, the fact that the BBC Welsh Orchestra has been available here has had an effect on my work ... but then it has always been the same for all composers, even the greatest: they've written for what's to hand.

AJHR: This would then be the reason why you have not given us much solo piano music, or chamber music either?

GW: Yes, it's all a question of being asked. I have written settings of poems by Gerard Manley Hopkins for contralto and string sextet. That was for the Cheltenham Festival of 1958. When you are freelancing you are really caught up in commission. I think perhaps I've written in a chamber music style in some of my orchestral work which tends to be very polyphonic. There was indeed a stage when there was too much counterpoint, and I had to cut it down, which is very hard when your mind keeps creating more and more of it. Some orchestral players have said that my *Sea Sketches* for string orchestra are written in a chamber music style.

AJHR: The sea, of course, has always meant something special to you.

GW: Oh yes. I've lived most of my life within sight of the sea, and I shall never tire of looking at it and listening to its wonderful sounds. It must have influenced my music – its rhythms and long flowing lines and its colours must have had an effect, not only on my sea music, but on other works not directly associated with the sea.

AJHR: Then there's your well-known fondness for the trumpet. What does that stem from?

GW: I don't quite know. Possibly from World War I when I was a child, and Barry was full of training camps and battalions marching through the streets with bands playing. If I remember rightly there was a fine regimental band which gave concerts in the park round the corner. When I grew older – and wiser – I became a pacifist; but the lure of cornets and bugles persisted, and perhaps paved the way for my entanglements with the orchestral trumpet. I think some Welsh wags may well have dubbed me “Grace Williams the Trumpet”. Eventually I wrote a Trumpet Concerto. I have a soft spot for that work, as indeed I do for the work I've written for my favourite woodwind instrument: *Carillons* for Oboe and Orchestra.

AJHR: We are fortunate in having a superb recording of those two works, together with your ever-popular *Fantasia on Welsh Nursery Tunes*, issued under the auspices of the Welsh Arts Council – and indeed other attractive discs featuring your *Sea Sketches* and *Penillion* for Orchestra; a most handsome and representative selection of your music. But let's return to more technical considerations: do musical ideas generally come easily to you?

GW: Generally, yes; but we composers have to stick at it sometimes you know. You can spend a whole day working at something, finding it very stick, then eventually realise that it's no good and scrap it; but if you stick at it for several days something is bound to happen. Well, I suppose it doesn't have to, but generally I find it does. Strange things, quite accidental things, will start up a train of thought.

AJHR: Even other music, possibly?

GW: Yes, of course. After all it's music more than anything else which begets music.

AJHR: How much are you influenced by external things when you write?

GW: External things will perhaps give me ideas, but – and I think this will apply to every composer – once you've started you are concerned with purely musical problems, unless you are setting words. Even then you've got to be careful that the music doesn't “run away” – that is from the meaning of the text. I remember a composer friend who had been brought up in a very sophisticated London home, who had never heard the *Messiah*. When grown up she thought she'd take herself off to the Albert Hall to repair the omission. She enjoyed it very much, but she told me that some things really puzzled her. “You know, Grace, there's a chorus where they all sing 'All we like sheep are gone astray', and honestly, you'd think they couldn't care less!” You see, if you think about it, that is what the music conveys; apart from a passage with a marvellous modulation to the minor, it would seem a very superficial setting of those words!

AJHR: Are you ever astonished by the mood of the music you are writing, let's say in contradiction to how you outwardly feel yourself? Put more crudely, do you find yourself writing “sad” music when you are feeling quite cheerful, or something of that kind?

GW: Of course this can happen. You project yourself like an actor; you have to, when setting a text for example.

AJHR: Don't you ever feel: “No, I'm not in the mood for writing this sort of music today”?

GW: Of course – but when there's a dateline ahead ... ! However, there are times when you're simply not up to writing anything at all. Again some of the very greatest composers have experienced this. It's a mysterious business; some people believe it works in some sort of cycle. Then of course as I said earlier a little thing can light a spark and start it all up again. Take Verdi's

Don Carlos, which is lovely music throughout, but something must have happened when he got to the King's Aria in the Fourth Act – a piece which was right up his street – from then on to the end of the opera the music is superb. I've often said to myself "My goodness I'd love to have been Verdi from that moment onwards". Another thing is that each composer has rhythms or moods, or whatever, which suits him particularly; not necessarily part of his own character, but things around which he can write his best music. With Verdi it can be anything which recalls the crack of doom, but he was not himself a doom-laden man.

AJHR: Did you ever feel you had to avoid certain styles and influences, to protect your personal development?

GW: I have avoided things which were wrong for me, such as serialism because it was not melodically suitable. But remember, every composer has his own series of notes which form his idiom, though it does not obey the semitonal rules of serialism itself. I do know from my own tunes there are right and wrong things; it's partly instinctive, but you find you are keeping to the same series of notes. If I'm sight-reading, say, a score of Britten's, I know at once if I've played a wrong note – it sounds out of context with the composer's "series". We've all got a "series", or there would be no style.

AJHR: You have the reputation of being very self-critical, one who revises and rejects a great deal.

GW: Yes I am. I've just revised the last movement of my Symphony, but what I really did was to cut out all the dead wood, and of course I had to re-write over the joins. I've always thought that finale unsatisfactory, and previous alterations never really worked. Now that I've given up commissions I had the time to deal with it, and it has taken me some months because I had to do a complete set of new parts. It has been played since, and I certainly think it's much better.

AJHR: You discarded your First Symphony?

GW: Well I kept the Scherzo, which stands on its own. I find there are several works I want to revise including the Violin Concerto. A composer whose style changes and develops rapidly would not be able to do this. Generally it is perhaps difficult to think yourself back to something which is some years old, but you are better able to see what's wrong after a lapse of time. It might be little things that have to be done, and especially cutting out – was always good at *précis*-writing in school, you see!

AJHR: Do you work to a particular routine?

GW: No, none; only a routine for housework and all the things which wouldn't otherwise get done. What I do is this: I compose at a stretch, suddenly realise I'm tired, or have a break for a meal, and afterwards go back over it, play it through, and try to listen to it as an outsider, and then I'm critical, and alterations are made at once. After this the process starts again. I've always been able to get works done in time and not keep people waiting, but I don't feel I'm able to do it now, which is why I'm glad I don't have to depend on commissions, though when I was young I was crying out for them. Eventually they came, from here there and everywhere, but chiefly from Wales. The BBC in Wales has been very generous to native composers, as has the Welsh Arts Council in offering its own commissions and providing funds for festivals to commission works, and, perhaps most important of all, in sponsoring the kind of gramophone recordings of our music which you have mentioned; that has helped enormously.

AJHR: To me (and I have no doubt to many other people) certain of your works show an awareness of your Welsh roots, which seems to go beyond the mere choice of picturesque titles. I presume you

can trace quite consciously the idiomatic strands and other influences to which you seem to have given full rein in much of your music?

GW: I had a thorough grounding in Welsh airs and Welsh folk songs when I was a child and teenager, and they found their way into some very early works, now withdrawn, and of course into the *Fantasia*. Then later on in the fifties there was the influence of the rhythms, intonations and cadences of Welsh oratory, and the atmosphere of the Mabinogion, which can be felt in my *Penillion* for Orchestra. Later still, I've done some settings of medieval Welsh poetry which I think are very Welsh. Indeed I've always considered myself very fortunate to have been born Welsh.