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## **Songwriter to Singer**

### **The Composer Dilys Elwyn-Edwards talks to Phyllis Kinney**

**P.K. :** Dilys, you and I have been friends for nearly twenty years now, but I have known you only as a mature composer. Going back to your childhood, what were the influences that led to your development as a writer – of songs in particular?

**D.E-E. :** Until I went to university the important early influences were naturally associated with Dolgellau, the town where I grew up. My father was a talented musician, self-taught, as most were then, but able to read music equally well in old notation and in tonic sol-fa. He was the Precentor at the local Methodist Church and the conductor of a number of choirs. He also played the euphonium. And, incidentally, it was he who taught me how to produce my voice properly and not to hoot (as I'm afraid the choirs in Dr. Williams School tended to do!). My mother was an avid reader and I must have inherited my love of words from her for she introduced me to all kinds of literature, Welsh and English, from the traditional classics to the modern writers. Mary Webb was a great favourite of hers.

**P.K. :** What about your schooling?

**D.E-E. :** I was a pupil at Dr. Williams School, Dolgellau, a boarding school with a strong emphasis on music and the arts. It was there that I fell in love with the music of Delius. I hadn't heard very much English music before – the town choir that I accompanied sang mostly Handel and Mendelssohn (*Elijah*, etc.) and I was completely bowled over by Vaughan Williams and Holst. And it was at Dr. Williams School, which had a very good music department, that I wrote my first composition, and, as one might expect, it was a song – a setting of Robert Bridge's *I love all beauteous things*. My teacher seemed taken with it, but I was somewhat affronted when she asked me if I'd written it myself!

While at Dr. Williams School I won the Turle Music Scholarship to Girton College, Cambridge, but did not take it up as my Matriculation subjects didn't tally with the University entrance requirements. An extra polish on my Latin would have done the trick, but I was impatient to get on with my music, and so I accepted the Joseph Parry Scholarship to University College, Cardiff, where I studied for the degree of B.Mus.

**P.K. :** Was it there that you really began to compose in earnest?

**D.E-E. :** Yes, indeed. To tell you the truth, I wasn't very keen on the academic side and enjoyed composing and performing much more. The BBC broadcast some of my songs and I sang with the college madrigal group which did a number of broadcasts. The weekly college concerts at the Reardon Smith Theatre were of a

particularly high standard and a delight to listen to, and I regard these concerts as one of the main influences in my musical life. Altogether, it was a happy and fruitful time.

**P.K. :** And then you went to London?

**D.E-E. :** Oh, no. After getting my B.Mus. I returned to Dr. Williams School and taught there for three years. But during my time at Cardiff I had been strongly attracted to the music of Herbert Howells. I well remember singing his exquisite carol, *Here is the little door*. And I was determined that somehow, by hook or by crook, I would get to London to study with him. I tried an open scholarship in composition at the Royal College of Music where Howells taught (and still does part-time!) and happily got it.

**P.K. :** So that was the end of your apprenticeship and the beginning of your life as a fully-fledged composer. But a composer who has specialised almost entirely in songs. Have you ever had any desire to write instrumental works?

**D.E-E. :** Oh, yes. I have in fact written for various instruments and instrumental ensembles – for instance, piano, harp, flute and piano, piano trio, string orchestra, etc., but words – poems – are the things that really stimulate me, so I've concentrated on songs and part-songs. I believe, incidentally, as James Joyce's poem *Strings in the Earth and Air* puts it, that there are 'strings' between the arts, between painting and music and words. And, for me, there are very special 'strings' between music and poetry. I don't think my music could exist without words. There is a particularly strong tie.

**P.K. :** What do you look for in words to set to music?

**D.E-E. :** They must be about things that I like, appreciate, am sensitive to, such as nature – James Joyce's 'Strings' again. Nature is very important to me. I like going for walks, listening to the birds, looking at trees and flowers. This is why I liked Williams Parry's nature poem *Y Gylfinir* so much; the sheer atmosphere of the poem got me. And you can see the same influence in many of my part-songs – *Very old are the woods, Spring, the Sweet Spring, Tresaith*, etc.

**P.K. :** Your earliest settings of poetry were in English which were then translated into Welsh. But now you are setting Welsh words almost exclusively. How did that come about?

**D.E-E. :** Largely, I suppose, because of commissions. The BBC in Cardiff began it by asking for a group of children's songs with original Welsh words rather than translations. Elwyn, my husband introduced me to a book of poems by I. D. Hooson, and it was from this book that I chose poems for *Chwe Chân i Blant*. I felt

rather apprehensive – not having set Welsh words before – but I liked the poems very much and am happy that children have apparently taken to my settings.

**P.K. :** What Welsh poets do you like most to set?

**D.E-E. :** I find a great affinity with Williams Parry and I'm very fond also of Waldo Williams's poems, but I must admit that I read more of Waldo than I set!

**P.K. :** Does a verbal phrase bring to you a musical phrase? What happens after you've fallen for the poem?

**D.E-E. :** Sometimes a single line will be enough to excite my interest, and I'll set that one line even if it's in the middle of the poem. Or, again, just one word will inspire me – for example, the word 'Hiraeth' in Williams Parry's well-known sonnet *Mae Hiraeth yn y Môr*. Indeed, I've even known me begin by setting the last line of a poem! There is no knowing what will fire one's imagination. Sometimes it's the mood of a poem, or the colour.

**P.K. :** I notice you have written a number of song cycles such as *Chwe Chân i Blant*, *In Faëry*, *Caneuon y Tri Aderyn*, *Caneuon Natur*, *Tymhorau*, and the sequence you're working on at present.

**D.E-E. :** Yes, writing a group of songs or a song cycle appeals to me. If I'm writing one song, I like to work on a second or a third at the same time. It's as if one stimulates the other. For example, when I was working on *Caneuon y Tri Aderyn* I began the third song in the cycle, *Mae Hiraeth yn y Môr*, and wrote the opening for that. But I wasn't altogether happy about it, so I left it for a while and got to work on the other two. The three songs appeal very much to my feelings about nature. The first song, *Y Gylfinir*, means, of course, 'The Curlew', and the repetitive figure in the accompaniment is evocative of the curlew's plaintive call – that clear, pearly sound – mystical, in fact, which is so familiar to those of us who are privileged to live in this part of the country. 'Fel fflwt hyfrydlais' the poet describes it. You can sense the atmosphere of the moors, the heather, the mountain winds, and the marshes of the Foryd on the Menai Straits. *Tylluanod* is also a poem of mood and nature images. Elwyn and I had been walking along the road that skirts Llanberis lake and I had the picture of the lake with Snowdon behind it – to me one of the most emotive scenes in the whole of Snowdonia – when I settled down that evening to write the song. As you stand on the bridge near Bryn'refail – this, of course, is one of the most familiar pictures of Snowdonia – you can see the very scene, especially towards evening, which inspired Williams Parry. He talks of the 'hwyiaid gwylltion wrth angor dan y lloer, A Llyn y Ffridd ar Ffridd y Llyn, Trostynt yn chwifio'n oer'. And the mallard unfailingly appear at dusk to complete the picture.

But the real challenge was *Mae Hiraeth yn y Môr* because it is, of course, a sonnet, not a lyric. It was John Gwilym Jones, the dramatist, who suggested the poem to me (he it was, incidentally, who gave the song cycle its title, *Caneuon y Tri Aderyn*) and at first I shirked it, wanting to set a lyric. However, after searching for a suitable poem and failing to find anything that seemed right, I decided to attempt a setting. You see, whereas a lyric allows one a certain freedom, the strict metre of the sonnet restricts one. That was one reason why I felt uneasy about setting the poem, much as it appealed to me. However, the deadline for the commission was getting ominously near, and what with that plus some gentle bullying from my husband, I finished the song and sent it off, along with the other two, to the BBC.

**P.K. :** And it's become the most popular song you've ever written?

**D.E-E. :** Yes, certainly the most popular, but, if I may be allowed a comment – I'm not complaining – I wish singers would perform the cycle as a whole. Indeed, if only one song of the cycle is sung, *Y Gylfinir* would be my favourite, but then it is not for me to dictate to singers!

**P.K. :** Dilys, do you think primarily vocally when you write or is it always voice and piano together?

**D.E-E. :** They seem to come together. Sometimes there will be a few bars of voice and nothing else, but usually I have an idea what the accompaniment figure is going to be. To me melody and accompaniment are one. One finds this very markedly in Schumann's songs, his *Im Wunderschönen Monat Mai*, for example, where voice and piano are indissoluble, and this has obviously very greatly influenced my writing.

**P.K.:** What other composers have influenced you as a writer of songs? You mentioned Delius, Holst and Vaughan Williams earlier.

**D.E-E. :** I am very fond of Quilter, although I suppose some of his songs belong to a certain era. And again, Peter Warlock. I think his *Sleep* is one of the most beautiful songs ever written. It was John Hughes, Arwel's brother, incidentally, who introduced me to Peter Warlock. He gave me a book of his songs when I was a student. A book which I cherish very much.

**P.K. :** I can see influences of the English twentieth century song revival in your early music, but not now. Debussy is a more enduring influence, I feel, particularly in the treatment of accompaniments, as well as Schumann, but by now your style is your own.

**D.E-E. :** Yes, I would hope so, particularly, perhaps, in later songs.

**P.K. :** Do you think that the change of language from English in the early songs to Welsh in the later ones has made any difference to your music?

**D.E-E. :** No, I don't think so. I don't think language-wise that my style has changed in any way. Nor do I feel the songs are either particularly Welsh or English. If one has to give them some sort of label, I suppose they are just songs in the European tradition.

**P.K. :** On the other hand, *The Bird of Christ* and *Sweet Suffolk Owl* are early works in a very different style from *Caneuon Natur*.

**D.E-E. :** Yes, I think that is true. *The Bird of Christ* was written in a modal style with obvious Celtic undertones. *Sweet Suffolk Owl* is very romantic and diatonic. I knew little of 'Lieder' when I wrote my first songs, but I would hope that my writing now shows something of the influence of Lieder tradition.

**P.K. :** I see a great affinity between your songs and those of Hugo Wolf; you have a similar sensitivity in the treatment of words, though I feel you have a stronger melodic gift. Like you, he devoted himself almost entirely to song-writing, but he worked at white heat for short spells, doing perhaps thirty songs in a month and then nothing for six months. How do you work?

**D.E-E. :** Well, of course, I could never write thirty songs in a month! But there is, perhaps, some similarity. I find that I work best under pressure. That is why the deadline of a commission is so helpful. But, on the other hand, I enjoy a break after composing, a rest from it, but never a rest from music itself. That is always with me.

**P.K. :** You are an experienced adjudicator of the National Eisteddfod and have been a member of the permanent music committee for some six years now. There is always someone to raise the cry that the standards are low, but in the thirty-odd years since I first came to Wales I have noticed a gradual but definite change for the better.

**D.E-E. :** It's very encouraging to hear you say that, and I hope that you're right. But I must confess I have some reservations. Much can be done however, particularly, I would think, by means of the growing influence of the central committees, music and others. The Eisteddfod deserves our full support as professionals and amateurs for it has much to contribute to the arts in Wales.