

Expanding the Canon:
A Feminist Analysis of Grace Williams

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Abstract

Grace Williams is hailed as the one of the most influential Welsh composers of the Twentieth-century, credited with bringing orchestral music to her country. Throughout her life, Williams claimed that her gender did not limit her ability to find success as a composer, however despite her numerous accomplishments, her musical legacy was essentially forgotten following her death in 1977. This thesis analyzes her five-movement work for chamber orchestra, *Sea Sketches*, to demonstrate Williams' innovative and original musical voice; attributing her musical erasure to the gender biases afflicting women composers in England in the Twentieth and Twenty-First centuries.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Figures.....	iv
Part I. Grace Williams- Between Two Worlds.....	1
Part II. <i>Sea Sketches</i>	6
Part III. "High Wind:" Symmetry.....	8
Part IV. "Channel Sirens:" Reclaiming the Siren.....	22
Part V. Conclusion.....	34
Bibliography.....	37

List of Figures

Figure 1	13
<i>'High Wind' motive seen in the Violin II and Violas</i>	
Figure 2	14
<i>Harmonic Progression chart in 'High Wind' movement</i>	
Figure 3	15
<i>Charted pitches from Figure 2</i>	
Figure 4	17
<i>Instruments with 'high wind' motive</i>	
Figure 5	18
<i>mm. 31-34, 'high wind' alternating between Cello and Violin 2</i>	
Figure 6	20
<i>The opening of "High Wind," 'high wind' motive in Vln 2 and Viola</i>	
Figure 7	21
<i>First page of Britten's 'Les Illuminations'</i>	
Figure 8	23
<i>"Ship" motive</i>	
Figure 9	24
<i>"Ship" motive in cello, C^bM7/F accompanying harmony and octatonic scale</i>	
Figure 10	26
<i>Chordal section with viola solo (siren song) giving way to rhythmic dissintegration with "Ship" motive</i>	
Figure 11	28
<i>Final iteration of the "ship" motive before final cadence on D</i>	

Part I. Grace Williams- Between Two Worlds

Grace Williams dedicated her life to composing, teaching, and studying music. Born in 1906 in the town of Barry, a coastal town in South Wales about ten miles south of Cardiff, Williams grew up in a musical family, and was encouraged to begin her musical explorations at a young age. In 1923, after receiving a scholarship, Williams entered Cardiff University and received a Bachelor of Music degree in 1926. Williams always regarded her experience at the institution as negative, stating that it was a waste of three years spent stifling her compositional creativity.¹ Immediately following her graduation, she entered the Royal College of Music in London to study composition for an advanced degree, with the renowned British composer Ralph Vaughan Williams as her main mentor.² Her time at the College, rich with compositional opportunities, brought with it a supportive and talented cohort. The 1920s saw an influx of talented women composers into the College, including Dorothy Gow, Imogen Holst, Elisabeth Lutyens, Elizabeth Maconchy, and more. These women would later form a composers' club where they would exchange comments on each other's works and discuss other influential modern pieces.³ The friendship that blossomed during this time, especially between Maconchy and Williams, would prove to be an invaluable support network as these burgeoning new musical voices

¹ Mathias, Rhiannon. *Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music*. New York, NY: Routledge, 2016, 30.

² *Ibid*, 21.

³ *Ibid*, 3.

transitioned from the relatively prejudice-free environment of College into the gender-biased professional world of music.⁴

In 1930, Vaughan Williams encouraged Williams to continue her education and, after receiving a travel grant, she went to Vienna to study with Viennese composer Egon Wellesz. Associated with the Second Viennese School and himself a pupil of Arnold Schoenberg, Wellesz exposed Williams to the music of Mahler, Strauss, Berg, and Webern, with whom he had lasting friendships.⁵ Though she claimed she was not fond of Mahler's music, and there exist few direct traces of the style or procedures of either Mahlerian late-Romanticism or Second Viennese School-style ultramodernism in her mature music, Williams's compositional voice was nevertheless enriched and refined through her intensive studies with figures at the vanguard of modern classical music.

Williams was a prolific composer and remained active through her whole lifetime, composing symphonies, concertos, chamber and solo instrumental works, vocal and choral works, symphonic suites and poems, and even a film score for the movie *Blue Scar*.⁶ In the early 1930s, she became the music master at the Camden School for Girls in North London, where she developed a close personal friendship with composer Benjamin Britten. He, like Vaughan Williams and Wellesz, encouraged her to explore and develop

⁴ For more information on Grace Williams' education, see Mathias, Rhiannon. Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music.

⁵ *Ibid* 39.

⁶ Boyd, Malcolm. "Williams, Grace." *Grove Music Online*. 2001; Accessed 16 Oct. 2019. <https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000030347>.

her already quite distinctive and sophisticated style. Throughout her time at the Camden School, Williams composed music informed by her modern London lifestyle and infused by the vital musical energies of interwar Britain; at the same time, she increasingly found herself channeling and paying homage to the more traditional, primarily choral repertoire of her musical upbringing in rural Wales. Williams's compositional output throughout the 1930s was so evidently split between these two worlds—urbane and modern on one hand, traditionalist and rustic on the other—that listeners and later commentators on her music suggested her music sounded as if she were writing for two different audiences. Musicologist and British music scholar Rhiannon Mathias, for example, draws attention to Williams's compositional versatility in being able to operate in two starkly different musical spheres:

Pieces performed at the London concert series such as the Suite tended to be abstract, instrumental works which made little direct reference to Wales. These works reflected an awareness of what would have been the latest musical developments- Bartók, Stravinsky- influences which had been assimilated into Williams's music in a natural way. On the other hand, she was also writing music of a more overtly popular bias which drew on traditional Welsh sources and which was intended for Welsh audiences- arrangements of traditional Welsh folk tunes for vocal or orchestral forces.⁷

Williams continued composing in this dual style until her death in 1977, premiering many pieces to enthusiastic audiences along the way. Of particular importance in the dissemination of her works was the establishment of the Macnaghten-Lemare Concerts in 1931, an essential platform for young and/or at the time under-exposed British composers

⁷ Mathias, Rhiannon, 58.

ranging from Britten to Finzi to Tippett to have their works performed in the 1930s.⁸ Launched and maintained by a group of composers including Elizabeth Lutyens, Iris Lemare, and Anne McNaughten, this concert series gave women like Williams a then-rare opportunity to see their works performed in a sustained way within a high-profile venue. These concerts represented a concerted effort to expand and secure the presence of female composers in the continuing tradition of classical art music. Just because they occurred, however, does not mean the Macnaghten-Lemare Concerts were altogether successful in changing the general attitude towards women composers in the United Kingdom. In April 1960, Williams, along with a number of other composers including Elizabeth Maconchy and Ina Boyle, saw a number of her pieces performed in a special Macnaghten-Lemare Concert. On the program was Williams's 1944 piece for string orchestra, *Sea Sketches*. Premiered in 1947 by the BBC Welsh Orchestra and conductor Mansel Thomas, *Sea Sketches* captivated the audience and rose to become one of Williams' most popular and well-loved pieces.⁹

However, following the performance, in a review for *The Musical Times*, Stanley Bayliss wrote:

'Contemporary' is a much abused word nowadays, but all six ladies, I am glad to say, are living and five of them took 'calls.' Not one of their works, however, could be regarded as stylistically contemporary... The most notable works were Elizabeth Maconchy's *Concertino* and

⁸ *Ibid*, 59

⁹ *Ibid*, 145.

Grace William's *Sea Sketches*, but neither attained real individuality or memorability, both being reflective of Vaughan Williams...¹⁰

The mid-century concert music scene in Britain, though flooded with talented female composers, still existed under the weight of male hegemony. Despite writing highly individualistic music that was tonally and rhythmically progressive, composers like Maconchy and Williams were, in the eyes of critics like Bayliss, unable to have their work separated from the influence and reputation of their male teachers.

As is too often the case, the full extent of a woman composer's influence and innovation is only recognized years after her death; this recognition requires the concerted efforts of concert programmers, historians, and analysts to reintroduce and re-explore the music of a figure who should never have been forgotten in the first place. Today, Grace Williams is hailed as the one of the most important Welsh composers of the twentieth century; credited with bringing orchestral music to Wales, Williams received countless awards and grants throughout her lifetime.¹¹ Despite her accomplishments, her musical legacy was essentially forgotten following her death in 1977.

¹⁰ Beausang, Ita, and Barra Séamas De. *Ina Boyle (1889-1967): a Composers Life*. Cork, Ireland: Cork University Press, 2018, 49.

¹¹ Throughout her life, Williams received numerous commissions from the BBC and various music festivals. In 1923, she received the Morfydd Owen Scholarship to study at Cardiff University. In 1930, she won the RCM Octavia Travelling Scholarship which enabled her to travel to Vienna to complete her studies with Wellesz. In 1941, she released her *Fantasia on Welsh Nursery Tunes*, which was so well received that it was recorded by the London Symphony Orchestra. In 1966, she was offered the OBE (Order of the British Empire) award for her contributions in music, however she turned it down hoping her music would stand on its own. On her 70th birthday, she received tributes from admirers and composers around the world. In 2006, the centenary of her birth, the BBC made her the "composer of the week."

Using a characteristically refined and sophisticated orchestral work, *Sea Sketches*, as a case study, I will argue that Williams's compositional style was not only innovative, but wholly original and representative of a distinct and new voice in British music. This thesis seeks to expand upon music theory in general, as women's music is often under-studied and under-analyzed in this discipline. Though women's music is under-analyzed, the theorists who are analyzing it are usually women themselves, such as Julie Dunbar, Laurel Parsons, and Brenda Ravenscroft, who have compiled multiple volumes of essays on women composers.¹² Pedagogically, this piece can be used to demonstrate organization of tonal centers and symmetry while diversifying and expanding the canonic examples utilized in theory courses and discussion. Studying Williams' music should not be made into a special case just because she is a woman; rather it should be approached with the same critical and analytic methodology that would be used when analyzing a piece already established within the canon. We can attribute her musical erasure to the gender biases afflicting female composers in England in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Part II. *Sea Sketches*

Sea Sketches is a five-movement work for string orchestra composed in 1944, in the midst of World War II. Works for string orchestra were

¹² Parsons, Laurel, and Brenda Ravenscroft. *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Concert Music 1960-2000*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.

limited but popular in the music of Twentieth-Century Britain; for example, the *Brook Greene Suite* by Gustav Holst, *Capriol Suite* by Peter Warlock, and *Fantasia on a theme by Thomas Tallis* by Ralph Vaughan Williams, to name a few.¹³ Williams dedicated this piece to her parents who “had the good sense to set up home on the coast of Glamorganshire.”¹⁴ World War II took a toll on both Williams’ mental state and her physical health. At the start of the war, she sent her manuscripts to a friend in Wales to ensure their safety during the bombings. By the end of the war, at the advice of her doctors, she moved back home to live with her parents, where she was able to draw solace and inspiration from the sea, just as she had in her youth. Each movement of the piece is given a title evocative of a maritime setting:

I. High Wind: “High Wind” is 97 measures long and takes approximately three minutes to perform. Though the key transitions throughout, it begins loosely in the key of G and ends conclusively in C.

II. Sailing Song: At 56 measures long and marked *Allegretto*, it takes approximately two minutes to perform, making it the briefest movement to perform. Though it harmonically deviates slightly in the middle, it is in C throughout most of the piece, including the final cadence.

III. Channel Sirens: Though this movement is technically the shortest with only 46 measures, its slow tempo marking, *Lento Misterioso*, takes four

¹³ Lee, Douglas. *Masterworks of 20th-Century Music: The Modern Repertory of the Symphony Orchestra*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

¹⁴ Mathias, Rhiannon. Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music, 140.

and a half minutes to perform. Mostly bichordal and octatonic, this movement ends centered around D.

IV. Breakers: This movement is the fastest; marked *Presto*, it takes about two minutes and ten seconds to perform all 117 measures. Beginning with an F-sharp-centered tonality, this movement concludes in D.

V. Calm Sea In Summer: This final movement is the longest to perform. The *Andante tranquillo* is 103 measures long and takes approximately six minutes. Though there are numerous tonal shifts throughout, the movement begins and ends in E.

For the purpose of this thesis, I will only be analyzing I. “High Wind” and 3. “Channel Sirens.” Though each of these movements are rich in harmony and texture, “High Wind” and “Channel Sirens” reflect the different aspects and binaries of Grace Williams’ musical voice— namely innovation, modernism, and sophistication. “High Wind” places emphasis on the traditional element of Williams’ music, strongly rooted and connected to place and nature. “Channel Sirens” is a clear representation of Williams’ intent to reclaim the feminine identity of the siren through innovative and voiceless construction.

Part III. “High Wind:” Symmetry

In 1944, following the completion of this piece, Williams left London to return to the place that inspired her composition: her childhood home on the coast of Wales. Mathias states “Wales was a natural source for her

creativity (both musically and imaginatively) and many, although not all, of her works were inspired by Welsh sources.”¹⁵ This piece embodies the Welsh admiration of the sea, paying respect to both its violence as well as its beauty.¹⁶ Welsh musical tradition prior to the twentieth century consisted primarily of choral music.¹⁷ Williams demonstrated advanced compositional techniques throughout this piece that Welsh traditional music was only just being introduced to. Using unexpected harmony, a soft hint of a tonal center, and complex rhythmic motives, Williams is able to successfully marry the importance of Welsh tradition, respect to natural surroundings, with the advancements in twentieth-century music. In analyzing what is original about “High Wind,” it will serve to compare it to one other contemporaneous piece similar in style and structure in order to demonstrate the quality of her music against that of her contemporaries. When comparing the legacy and success of her piece with that of a male composer of similar style and time, Benjamin Britten, it becomes clear that– despite utilizing similar compositional techniques– Williams’ legacy is forgotten while Britten’s is highly celebrated and studied.

“Trials and tribulations and despair have come my way, and still come my way, but they have nothing to do with my being a woman: they are wholly

¹⁵ Mathias, Rhiannon, 5.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ Kinney, Phyllis. *Welsh Traditional Music*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press in association with Cymdeithas Alawon Gwerin Cymru, 2015, xvii

concerned with my being a composer.”¹⁸ Grace Williams maintained that the hardships she faced throughout her life were the product of circumstance and time, rather than gender. Because Williams was facing a world war, a lifetime of health issues, and countless other obstacles that exacerbated the uncertainty of being a composer, it makes sense that her sex would not be the most obvious reason that she would be experiencing difficulties. While she may not have faced outward prejudice during her lifetime, the complications that accompany being a woman composer were enforced following her death in 1977. Looking at her legacy and how it measures up against one of her male counterparts makes that argument apparent.

Benjamin Britten, a close friend of Williams and fellow twentieth-century composer, makes for an excellent point of comparison. Britten was wildly controversial during his lifetime, far more so than Williams, but is considered one of the most successful and celebrated English composers of the twentieth-century today.¹⁹ Britten’s piece for high voice and strings, *Les Illuminations* (1940) is undeniably similar to Williams’ “High Wind” in terms of harmony, texture, and orchestration.²⁰ A comparative analysis of these pieces will demonstrate the compositional techniques and styles of the

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 29.

¹⁹ Oliver, Michael. *Benjamin Britten*. London: Phaidon, 1996, 11.

²⁰ Benjamin Britten’s *Four Sea Interludes* from Peter Grimes may seem like a more obvious choice, but the similarities between *Les Illuminations* and *High Wind* are more striking and offer a more interesting analysis. For more information on *Four Sea Interludes* and Benjamin Britten, see:

Osborne, Charles. “Benjamin Britten.” In *The Opera Lover’s Companion*, 56-82. Yale University Press, 2004. Accessed April 12, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1npv7b.13.

English tradition that both composers grew familiar with during their formal training—and found ways of elevating and personalizing them to generate an individual style. Only Williams' music however, would be erased from the repertoire.

Both Williams and Britten studied with Vaughan Williams, allowing them to find inspiration through Tudor music and English folk songs.

Vaughan Williams, along with his RCM contemporary, John Ireland, was credited as a creator of the English Pastoral School.²¹ This folk-infused nationalist tradition is rooted in a sense of “place,” according to Rayborn and Marshall-Luck.

The sense of place in the music is particularly strong, as Giles Auty notes, speaking of the arts in general: “Most of the more enduring strains in British art are liked indissolubly with our countryside.” More recently, Em Marshall-Luck has written *Music in the Landscape*, a fine survey of British composers and their relationship to the land, showing that even those composers more associated with Impressionism and modern developments regarded their native landscape with love, and even awe.²²

Though Britten detested this sense of folk tradition, this connection to place held true for Grace Williams, as she frequently credited much of her inspiration to her house on the coast of Wales. Her place in the Pastoralist school is just one source of inspiration that affected her output.

I myself feel that I must now write something specially for the Club and have in mind a short suite of pieces connected with Barry- three

²¹ Rayborn, Tim, and Em Marshall-Luck. *A New English Music: Composers and Folk Traditions in England's Musical Renaissance from the Late 19th to the Mid-20th Century*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2016, 5.

²² *Ibid*, 7.

(or 4 or 5) seascapes perhaps... I never tire of looking at [the sea], and listening to it,' she later stated, 'and I like to think that it's had some influence on my music. There's my fondness for long undulating melodic lines and flowing rhythms, particularly in works that were directly sparked off by the sea."²³

Around the same time Williams was studying in Austria, Benjamin Britten was discouraged from completing post-graduate study with Berg in Vienna: a huge disappointment for him, as he had become most acquainted with the music of these Second Viennese School Composers.²⁴ Initially, his mother hoped he would be a "fourth B;" ironically, Britten grew to dislike the "traditional" music of the three B's. Though neither Britten or Williams were quite as radical in their utilization of atonality or twelve-tone composition, the influence of the School's techniques are apparent in both *Sea Sketches* and *Les Illuminations*.

"High Wind" introduces and develops several motives for each instrument within the string choir. For example, what I will label the 'high wind' rhythmic motive, consists of a repeating 32nd note tremolo figure that weaves its way through instruments and continues swirling forward for the entirety of the piece, with a brief hiatus in the middle, and then winds down at the very end when the gale subsides. While this rhythmic motive is carrying the piece forward, the harmonic relationships also have a hand in developing the "storm."

²³ *Ibid*, 139.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 7.

The harmonic content of “High Wind” consists of a series of oscillating, semitonally-adjacent triads and tritonal patterns, structured around a large-scale somewhat symmetrical harmonic progression. These patterns continue until the ‘high wind’ rhythmic motive, pictured below, is abandoned entirely at measure 51. The harmonic progression is developed and expanded slightly more in the second half of the movement.



Figure 1. ‘High Wind’ motive seen in the Violin II and Violas

Below is a chart of the harmonic progression for the “High Wind” movement, with corresponding measure numbers and brief descriptions of pertinent tonal relationships. Immediately some patterns become apparent; for instance, the alternation of adjacent major triads, found in measures 1 through 6 and 62 through 69, are highlighted in yellow. The first iteration of this pattern is a whole-step lower than the final iteration of it: G-F# vs. Ab-A. The tritonal relationship, considered unstable or unpleasant, is used to create

the feeling of instability, evoking high winds on a stormy sea.²⁵ The repetition of the C-major to F#-major triad alternation is also found throughout the movement: once in the beginning, once with a modal shift (now C-minor to F#-minor) in the middle, and back in its original form before the cadence at the end; these are highlighted in blue.

MEASURES	HARMONY	NOTES
mm. 1-6	G --- F#	Main theme; alternation of adjacent major triads
mm. 6-10	C --- F#	Second half of the main theme; tritonal relationship
mm. 10-12	C (c7)	Chromatic melody in vln. 1 descent from G to E b
mm. 13-18	a --- d --- g#	Repeated tones in high strings followed by descending arpeggios
mm. 19-20	a --- B	Main theme in the middle voices; new key
mm. 21-30	C --- B (!!!)	Continuation of the Main theme; introduction to chromatic motiv in vln. 1
mm. 31-40	G	Sustained chords with 'high wind' rhythmic accompaniment
mm. 41-44	c --- f# (°)	Return of tritonal relationship but with minor quality
mm. 45-48	G	G pedal with half-step/octave leap accompaniment
mm. 49-55	G (g/g°)	New content- absence of 'high wind' rhythm; communicative chromatic descent
mm. 56-61	C --- E --- G	Outline C-Major triad; chromatic peak
mm. 62-69	A b --- A	Alternation of adjacent major triads
mm. 70-75	A b --- C --- E b	Outlining of the A b triad
mm. 76-82	C --- F#	Return to mm. 6-10 from beginning; tritonal reoccurrence
mm. 83-97	C	Chromatic descent to tonal cadence in C-Major

Figure 2. Harmonic Progression chart in 'High Wind' movement

In the graph below, I have taken the harmonic progression from Figure 2 and plotted the pitches to demonstrate the symmetry of the movement's overall tonal design. Though it is not quite exact, starting at measure 48, the pivot point, the tonal trajectory of the second half is a mirror reflection of the first, merely with h longer durations. The diatonic scale is symmetrical around the paired pitches of G and A, making G-sharp an

²⁵ Nielinger-Vakil, Carola. "Fragmente-Stille, an Diotima: World of Greater Compositional Secrets." *Acta Musicologica* 82, no. 1 (2010): 105-47. Accessed April 21, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/23075190.

appropriate pivot point for the harmonic progression to mirror outward.²⁶ Though measure 48 is seemingly nothing new, as it is a continuation of the “octave leap” theme, consisting of a descending half step followed by a descending octave, it is the last full iteration of this pattern before the abandonment of the ‘high wind’ motive. Harmonically, this final iteration acts as the axis of symmetry. After measure 48, the graph is a retrograde inversion of the first half, with slight deviation caused by the lack of return to the tritonal pattern. Everything in the second half is offset by one row from Figure 2: instead of going to C and F-sharp, the progression moves directly to G. The biggest deviation, however, is at the end of the piece, measures 83 through 97, which center around the eventual point of eventual arrival pitch, C. In addition to being the largest deviation from the pattern, this arrival on C is also the longest period in a set ‘tonal center,’ lasting a full 15 measures.

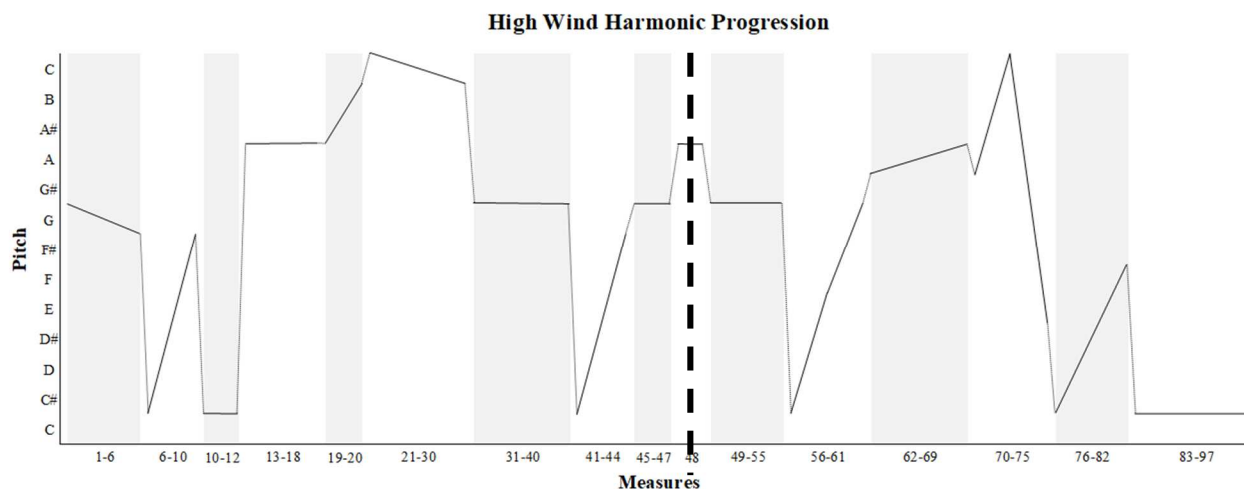


Figure 3. Charted pitches from Figure 2

²⁶ Ehle, Robert C. "Symmetry in Twentieth-Century Harmony." *American Music Teacher* 33, no. 5 (1984): www.jstor.org/stable/43541770, 5.

Through use of consistent harmonic and structural patterns, Williams creates a sense of familiarity. By situating the pitches on the Y-axis of the diagram, we can see the mirror image of the harmonic shape. In the same way that looking through a glass distorts the object you are looking at by size and shape, the graph is similar in that the second half is essentially the same foundational material, just distorted in size and shape.

"High Wind"'s harmonic relationships lend some sense of familiarity to the piece as a whole, but the primary glue of this movement is the aforementioned 'high wind' motive. This rhythm is the first thing one hears when the piece begins, starting in the second violins and the violas. Melodically, it consists of stepwise whole-steps within the span of a tritone, an intervallic precursor of the tritonal pattern between triads noted in the previous section. There are two periods of about 11 or 12 measures in which this motive is abandoned completely; once in the middle of the piece, and once in the end, each suggestive of the winds subsiding. Throughout the movement, however, this 'high wind' motive weaves its way through the middle voices, finding itself in the first violins only once, briefly, and never in the bass.

What really makes this technique so effective in generating the image of a storm over the sea is that this motive is constantly switching instruments, usually only staying for one measure at a time. For instance, measures 31 to 37, the cellos and second violins are alternating this rhythm one measure at a time. This creates the flowing lines and seemingly endless

patterns that Williams was known for.²⁷ This pattern repeats at the end as well, from measures 68 to 77, only this time switching between the second violins and the violas.

MEASURES	INSTRUMENTS	MEASURES	INSTRUMENTS
mm. 1-7	Violin 2 and Viola	mm. 35	Cello
mm. 8-9	Violin 2 and cello	mm. 36	Violin 2
mm. 10-13	Violin 2	mm. 37-50	Cello
mm. 14-17	Violin 2 and Viola	mm. 51-62	NO HIGH WIND
mm. 18	Violin 2	mm. 63-65	Violin 2
mm. 19-23	Violin 1	mm. 66-67	Cello
mm. 24-27	Viola	mm. 68-72	Viola
mm. 28	Cello	mm. 72-73	Violin 2
mm. 29	Violin 2	mm. 74	Viola
mm. 30	Viola	mm. 75	Violin 2
mm. 31	Cello	mm. 76	Viola
mm. 32	Violin 2	mm. 77	Violin 2
mm. 33	Cello	mm. 78-End	Viola
mm. 34	Violin 2		

Figure 4. Instruments with 'high wind' motive

²⁷ Mathias, Rhiannon. Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music, 140.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for measures 31-34. The first system includes parts for Violin I (Vns. I), Violin II (Vns. II), Viola (Vlas.), and Cello (Cellos). The second system includes parts for Violin I (Vns. I), Violin II (Vns. II), Viola (Vlas.), Cello (Cellos), and Contrabass (C.B.). The Cello part in both systems features a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes, with the first system marked 'arco' and 'C.B. tacet', and the second system marked '(pizz)'. The Violin II part in the second system has a dynamic marking of 'mf'. The Viola part in the second system also has a dynamic marking of 'mf'. The Cello part in the second system has a dynamic marking of 'mf'. The Contrabass part in the second system has a dynamic marking of 'mf'.

Figure 5. mm. 31-34, 'high wind' alternating between Cello and Violin 2

There are two sections in which the 'high wind' rhythm is abandoned entirely. The first, beginning at measure 51, acts as an "eye-of-the-storm;" a moment of brief calm that starts with slower movement one or two voices at a time, and then accelerates until a tutti chromatic descent at measure 60 spirals back into the storm at measure 62. Here, the 'high wind' picks up again immediately in the second violin. Although the main driving rhythm has temporarily subsided, the harmonic tension generated by the overlapping chromatic scale fragments is enhanced by the cyclical rhythm that is accompanying it. Despite the slower movement at first, the rhythm

still feels unceasing, and when the final chromatic descent happens, that spiral only adds to this frantic feeling of motion. The only sense of reprieve is found in the final 15 measures, when the 'high wind' motive is abandoned for the last time. Here, the harmony begins to find its way to C, settling on a clear, defined tonal center. Much like the spiral at measure 60, the instruments, beginning with the first violins, enter and dwindle in a layered fashion. This begins with the violin cadence, followed by the bass, and ending with a final sustained C in the violas and cellos.

Williams maintained a close friendship with Benjamin Britten throughout her life, though she turned down the opportunity to collaborate with him.²⁸ In 1940, Britten composed *Les Illuminations*, a song cycle for soprano soloist and string orchestra. The cycle is set to poems written by Arthur Rimbaud in the late nineteenth century, also called *Les Illuminations*.²⁹ The text for the fanfare, the section analyzed below, alludes to the idea that the only way to make it through life is to remain detached; a sentiment he mirrored in Britten's education, making it through to allow for his own artistry later. In a way, this piece is a commentary on life, similar to the way Williams' piece is as well; she just uses the sea as a metaphor for its phases. After premiering this song cycle in America during that same year, Britten faced some harsh criticism, specifically from Virgil Thompson who wrote, "I found the work pretentious, banal, and utterly disappointing, coming from so

²⁸ Mathias, Rhiannon. Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music.

²⁹ Osborne, Charles. "Benjamin Britten."

gifted a composer.”³⁰ Following these criticisms, he returned to Britain in 1942. Though *Les Illuminations* was composed four years before *Sea Sketches*, there are rhythmic, orchestral, and textural similarities between the beginnings of each piece; however, they develop independently into entirely different works. The staples of “High Wind”—the rhythmic complexity and unique harmonic relationships—are incredibly similar to *Les Illuminations*. Both entrances are pictured below in Figures 6 and 7, respectively.

The musical score is for the opening of "High Wind" in 2/4 time, marked "Allegro energico". It features six staves: Violins I, Violins II, Violas, Cellos, and Basses. The Violin parts (I and II) play a melodic line starting with a mezzo-forte (mf) dynamic, which increases to forte (f). The Viola part plays a complex, rhythmic pattern starting with a forte (f) dynamic. The Cello and Bass parts are mostly silent in this section.

Figure 6. The opening of “High Wind,” ‘high wind’ motive in Vln 2 and Viola

³⁰ Kildea, Paul. *Benjamin Britten: a Life in the Twentieth Century*. London: Penguin Books, 2014.

For Sophie Wyss

LES ILLUMINATIONS

A. RIMBAUD

I. FANFARE

BENJAMIN BRITTEN, Op. 18

Maestoso (poco presto), $\text{♩} = 108-112$

The first system of the score includes staves for Voice, Violins I, Violins II div., Violas, Violoncellos div., Double basses, and Piano Reduction. The tempo is marked 'Maestoso (poco presto)' with a metronome marking of 108-112. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The Violins I and II parts feature a prominent rhythmic pattern of eighth notes. A red circle highlights a specific passage in the Violins II part, which is marked 'Soli' and 'div. a. 4'. Other markings include 'sul tasto sempre', 'quasi trombe (poco sul ponticello)', and 'sempre pp'. The Piano Reduction part is marked 'pp sempre' and 'con f^{a} '.

The second system continues the musical score with staves for Violins I, Violins II div., Violas, Violoncellos div., Double basses, and Piano. The Violins I and II parts continue their rhythmic pattern. The Viola part has a marking '(sul A) marc.'. The Piano part features a complex accompaniment with various dynamics and articulations. The system is divided into two measures, labeled '1' and '2'.

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Figure 7. First page of Britten's 'Les Illuminations'

The tremolo in the Britten is echoed in the rolling of Williams's 'high wind' rhythmic motive. Though the tremolo eventually stops, its presence at the beginning generates forward motion in the same way that Williams does in "High Wind." In measure four of the Britten, there is an ascending arpeggio with a sustained D. This is similar to the ascending arpeggios found throughout the main theme of "High Wind," including the repeated notes to accelerate the ascent, as seen going from measure four to five in the Britten. Additionally, the Britten begins with a similarly ear-catching tritonal relationship between E and B-flat, circled in measure three. Though Williams exhibits some of the same compositional techniques as Britten, she develops the remainder of her piece completely differently. While maintaining some of the tritonal relationships and aspects of rhythmic intrigue, Williams manages to generate a narrative spanning each phase of living on the sea. Although they are connected by the same subject, Williams gives each movement its own character and narrative, introducing new elements as a means of developing them. Though each piece develops separately, Britten makes use of a solo voice in developing a fanfare and Williams centers her piece more towards developing a storm, allowing each composer to utilize similar techniques to generate their narrative.

Part IV. "Channel Sirens:" Reclaiming the Siren

This part of the thesis will focus on the third movement, "Channel Sirens." Though it is the only movement with a title connected to aspects of

Welsh mythology, specifically a “morgen,” it is the middle movement in a larger work that begins with chaos and ends with calm waters.³¹ Aside from the musical analysis, this section of the thesis also examines the what it means for a woman composer to base a composition on the siren figure, typically a cultural symbol of feminine temptation and danger with negative connotation. I will argue that, by not using the human voice to represent the destructive and alluring voice of the siren, Williams is able to reclaim and explore its feminine identity beyond its previous representations limited by solo voice or choir.

Marked *Lento Misterioso*, this movement's treacherous and eerie atmosphere is enhanced through the pervasive use of sliding *glissandi* and a similarly slippery harmonic structure. The movement opens with what I label the “Ship” motive, in muted violas and cellos, depicted in Figure 8.



Figure 8. “Ship” motive

This four-note motive can be found throughout the movement, coursing its way between different instruments and registers. The accompanimental material to this opening figure is comprised of chromatic, jarring chords in

³¹ A “morgen” is a Welsh or British water spirit known for their immense beauty and destructive nature. For more information about morgen’s, see:

Henderson, Bernard, and Stephen Jones. *Wonder Tales of Ancient Wales: Celtic Myth and Welsh Fairy Folklore*. Kalevala Books, 2010.

the upper strings, first outlining a fully diminished C7 chord before moving to the bichordal structure that puts E-flat minor over F major. The opening figure derives from the octatonic scale, instantly blurring an uncomplicated sense of tonality and enhancing atmosphere set up by the *Misterioso* expressive direction. Octatonicism was a technique that Williams had employed since her early days as a student and can be attributed to the influence Bartók and Vaughan Williams had on her compositional style; this will be discussed in more detail in a subsequent section.³² Though the melodic content of the “ship” motive is octatonic on its own, the accompanying harmony, though different at each iteration, is also built from the octatonic scale. For instance, the “ship” motive moves to the cellos in measure eight and is supported by a C-flat seventh chord over an F major chord, as can be seen in the figure below.



Figure 9. “Ship” motive in cello, C^bM7/F accompanying harmony and octatonic scale

³² *Ibid.* 56

The first 11 measures are structured in this bichordal fashion with each chord existing over an F-major triad. Measure 12 breaks the pattern, providing the first purely triadic sonority of an unadorned A-flat minor. Williams continues to blur the lines of tonality by applying enharmonic spellings in every instrument. On instruments capable of variable or continuous intonations, enharmonic spellings can signal actual differences in pitch; thus, for Williams's string players, a G-flat potentially sounds different than F-sharp. Though in recordings of this piece the difference in pitch is slight, its presence in all instruments successfully cultivates the seamless and uneasy melodic lines that Williams loved so much. It is also worth noting that this triadic arrival at measure 12 marks the entrance into the first homophonic texture within the movement. Though lacking the presence of the “ship” motive, this calm chordal section, with a harmonic shift suggesting B-flat, could be representative of sirens drawing in their victims.

Emerging from this homophonic texture is the viola solo, marked *senza sordino*, or without mute. Exposed, though still mezzo-piano, it creeps through the chordal texture with an ascending semitone line. This solo is brief but gives way to the second viola solo that enters in measure 18 with a variation of the “ship” motive from the beginning. The intersection of these two intertwining melodies- the “ship” motive and the siren song- can be interpreted as the siren call interacting with that of the sailors on the ship, drawing them in with their mysterious song. With the emergence of this

iteration of the main motive, the previous homophonic rhythmic cohesion disintegrates entirely.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The left system shows a chordal section with multiple staves for strings (Violin I, Violin II, Viola, Violoncello, and Contrabbasso). The right system shows a transition where the Viola has a solo part marked 'solo senza sordi' and 'mp', while other instruments are marked 'gli altri' and 'p'. The notation includes various dynamics like pp, mp, and p, and includes performance instructions like 'pizz. bnd' and 'div. bnd'.

Figure 10. Chordal section with viola solo (siren song) giving way to rhythmic disintegration with “Ship” motive

At measure 19, the violin 2 picks up a new variation of the “siren” motive while the violin 1 sustains a high F over a pure B-flat major chord. Harmonically, measures 19 to 32 shift between the functional relationship of B-flat major and minor seventh chords, and G-flat major chords. This section also includes the “ship” motive, back in its original form, in the solo violin 2. The other upper string voices create a clear but subtle counterpoint with successive ascending glissandi, each spanning a major sixth. The B-flat tonal center is strongly reinforced at measure 24, when the cellos repeat and sustain the tonic pitch. At measure 28, for the last two measures before the instrumental texture is reduced to single-voice unison, the bass subtly begins to imply a tonal shift to D with a brief pizzicato on the open fifth D and A. It is

only at the start of the conclusion at measure 35, however, that this shift to D is firmly cemented by the entire ensemble.

Tonal ambiguity has been a staple of this movement, with its idiosyncratic enharmonic spellings, harmonic shifts both smooth and abrupt, chained *glissandi* that blurred the tonal lines, and glimpses of octatonicism; together, these tonal techniques all collaborate to evoke an eerie and foggy ambiance suggestive of the siren's enticing but dangerous mystique. At measure 35, the fog appears to disperse as the D-centered harmony is implied. The relief of clear tonicity is short-lived, however, as pitch space is again muddied by the chromatically-related chords in the upper strings. Additionally, Williams decides to take the pieces sea-inspired rhythmic undulations one step further by off-setting the bass D and cello C-sharp-D to metrically blur the lines further. As this is happening, the upper strings begin the chromatic descent, usually in parallel thirds, that occupy the remainder of the piece. This descent over the sustained D-centered pedal decreases steadily in volume leading to a final "cadence" of sorts. In measure 43, the violins arrive definitively on a minor third, D-F, while the violas lead into one

last iteration of the “ship” theme, before the low strings end the piece on a single, unison D.



Figure 11. Final iteration of the “ship” motive before final cadence on D

The twentieth century was a period of transformation and transcendence by way of harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic alteration. Though there were various subgenres that emerged during this time, Williams was heavily influenced by compositional innovations in string music, particularly those of Bela Bartók. Bartók's six string quartets employed a set of specific techniques to distinguish his quartets from other string music that preceded it.³³ Brief analysis of these quartets illuminates the techniques mirrored in this particular movement of *Sea Sketches*. Bartók was fond of the use of short motives, usually three to four notes, that typically fall within the span of a perfect fourth or a tritone and are confined to one movement.³⁴ This

³³ Bartók composed six string quartets between the years of 1909 and 1939, directly influencing the work of composers such as Benjamin Britten (a friend of Grace Williams), György Ligeti, and Stefan Wolpe. Bartók assigned each of his string quartets to a major/minor key, gearing the tonal ambiguity towards atonality and making it difficult to comfortably discern which key you are in. This is present across his string quartets and is a clear influence on the music of Williams.

³⁴ Straus, Joseph N. “The Pitch Language of the Bartók Quartets.” Though he typically confines these motives to a single movement, occasionally he will use them as a bridge

immediately draws a parallel to the motivic application of the “Ship” motive; C- C#- E- F, is a four-note pattern that, is confined to the boundaries of the “Channel Siren” movement.

Bartók's chordal language throughout his string quartets is another source of inspiration for Williams. Joseph Straus observes:

...it is interesting to note how relatively rarely he uses consonant major and minor triads. ...triads still appear occasionally to mark the ends of phrases or sections or whole movements, but in such cases, they often emerge out of a chromatic and contrapuntal haze rather than asserting themselves as the logical goal of a directed progression.³⁵

In “Channel Sirens,” the first instance of a pure consonant triad appears as an A-flat minor chord at the transition from the beginning section into the middle, following Bartók's methods of using consonant triads to mark the end of sections otherwise obscured by a thick chromatic haze.³⁶ This Bartókian trend of flanking brief oases of triadic stability with a fog of chromatic counterpoint continues through to the end of the movement during the transition to the end, this time taking longer to devolve into chromatic descent. This is a technique that Williams adopts in this movement especially, and can be seen in instances like measure 12; the tonal center has been indiscernible until the triadic arrival on A-flat.

between movements and insert the motive into a different movement but in a transformed way (i.e. transposed to a new key or rhythmically altered).

³⁵ Straus, Joseph N. “The Pitch Language of the Bartók Quartets.” In *Intimate Voices: The Twentieth-Century String Quartet*, 1. Debussy to Villa-Lobos:70–111. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2009, 82.

³⁶ If the harmony was not triadically based, Bartók's harmonies could often be understood and analyzed as the verticalization of melodic fragments. For instance, he would stack the melodic intervals to create a harmonic replication across instruments.

A survey of works from female composers, musicians, and artists throughout the twentieth century reveals a persistent interest in reclaiming and reconfiguring the mythical subject of the siren, previously depicted almost entirely from a male perspective. For many women composers, by contrast, the siren became an iconic representative of feminine power and identity.³⁷ This artistic fascination with the siren can be seen in French composer Lili Boulanger's 1913 piece for chorus and orchestra, *Les Sirènes*, and Elizabeth Maconchy's 1974 piece for choir, *Siren's Song*.³⁸ Before this reclamation of feminine identity, Claude Debussy's depiction of the figure as a temptress in the third of his 1900 *Trois Nocturnes*, "Sirènes," stood as the most prominent and, for better or worse, typical depiction of the siren in modern composition. Scored for orchestra and female chorus, Debussy famously uses the wordless female choir to represent the tantalizing mystery of the mythical subject. When discussing the performance set up of this piece, Debussy remarked to a friend:

With regard to the third Nocturne (with female voices), I would ask you to make sure that the chorus is placed within the orchestra and not in front, which would result in an effect diametrically opposite to that which I am looking for: this vocal group should not be more prominent than any other section of the orchestra. In short, they should not stand out, but rather blend in.³⁹

³⁷ Austern, Linda Phyllis, and Inna Naroditskaya. *Music of the Sirens*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, 11.

³⁸ Maconchy's piece is scored for soprano solo and unaccompanied chorus: SSATB. The structure of her siren song begins with an introduction of the siren's voices, luring in the sailors, followed by the sailor's response. This carries on slowly, until the song hits its peak and recedes the way it approached.

³⁹ Herlin, Denis, ed. *Oeuvres Complètes de Claude Debussy*. Vol. 3. Paris: Éditions, 1999.

In other words, Debussy wanted the voices that represented the sirens to be merely in the background– perhaps this is the reason for the choir being wordless. Was the placement an artistic choice made to add to the mystery or rather another means of placing women in the musical background? The voice and beauty of the twentieth century siren are so captivating and powerful that they lure the men on the ships to their death. What, then, would the benefit be of placing the female voice within the orchestra, more likely to be overpowered? Subliminally, Debussy is claiming that in his piece centered around the siren, he does not want the female voice– the representation of that figure– to be the focus.

Lili Boulanger, on the other hand, used other compositional techniques to create a version of the siren that is as strategic as she is mesmerizing, a figure of brains rather than destructive beauty. For example, the first 28 measures of her piece revolve around an F-sharp pedal employed to create the hypnotic, trance-inducing power that sirens possess in order to lure in their prey and also the audience.⁴⁰ The pedal technique is related to drones employed in traditionally trance-oriented music, making it an appropriate and effective technique in this piece.⁴¹ In addition to her use of sustained harmonic pedal, Boulanger utilizes the technique of imitative entrances to further cultivate a sense of hypnotism and restlessness of waves. The off-setting of these entrances mirror the way Williams blurs

⁴⁰ Tasher, *A Conductor's Guide to the Choral Works of Lili Boulanger (1893–1918)*, 77.

⁴¹ Becker, Judith. "Music and Trance." *Leonardo Music Journal* 4 (1994): 41-51. Accessed April 22, 2020. doi:10.2307/1513180.

metric lines to create an endless sense of flowing water. Though Boulanger's approach remains more melodically focused compared to Debussy, both composers are successful in the muddying of time and metric structure. While Debussy's interpretation is one of mysterious beauty that cares for nothing more than superficial destruction, accomplished through wordless song, Boulanger's siren, alternatively, strategically and gracefully lures in ships through a drawn-out and patient song.

The most glaring difference between Williams' representation of the siren figure and that of Debussy and Boulanger is the lack of voice. Williams' "Channel Sirens" is entirely instrumental— even then, her choice of instrumentation and register defies the siren stereotype. The movement sits in a lower register and is grounded in the cello and bass. Vocally, the siren is typically represented either by a solo soprano or a women's choir— instrumentally as a flute or violin— something representative of a higher women's voice. Williams chooses to defy these oppressive siren stereotypes and situate this movement in the lower register.

Structurally, Williams's entry into the siren canon can be split into three sections: a beginning, middle, and end. In the beginning section, the narrative consists only of the ship moving through foggy waters. When the middle section begins at measure 14, the narrative, along with the tonal center, begins to evolve. Opening with the homophonic, chordal section elevates the already-present harmonic tension to a matter in urgent need of resolution—or at the very least clarification; something dark appears to be

coming. The unexpected emergence of the viola solo in measure 15 is representative of the siren's beckoning call. This initial siren statement is answered immediately in the second viola solo stating the "ship" motive. The intertwining "siren song" and "ship" motive collide, causing the disintegration of rhythmic unity presented in the homophonic passage. As the rhythm devolves into counterpoint, the tonal center begins its shift into B-flat, a key that will become representative of the ship and its impending collision. The following measures present a subtle counterpoint in which the upper strings present ascending major-sixth glissandos, all of which outline notes belonging to both D major and minor; a key that is representative of the sirens and their alluring song. The bass pizzicato pitches in measures 28 to 31 outline the open fifth on D, acting as the siren's song intermingling with the B-flat harmony above it. This blending of the siren and ship keys persists and evolves further until the beginning of the final section at measure 35.

The low strings at measure 35 give the illusion that the confusing and ambiguous tonal atmosphere is lifting into a brighter, D-centered tonality. The purity of this shift, however, is short-lived when the descending chromatic chords enter in the upper strings. Despite this harmonic re-muddying, the D-center presses on in the low strings until the end of the movement. The cellos heavily reinforce this D-tonic by returning the grace-note figure from the beginning between C-sharp and D. This return of the feminine voice enhances the siren's tonal presence, strengthening it until the cadence. The violas presentation of the final "ship" motive in measure 44

represents the last remnants of the ship before it finally sinks, giving way to siren victory, justifying the final “D” pitch. “Channel Sirens” is richly textured in terms of its harmonic, rhythmic, and symbolic language. Williams paints a picture of a temptress who is lethal in asserting her power.

Part V. Conclusion

For the woman composer in the twentieth-century, criticism, reception, and opportunity were not always kind. In the 1930s, British musical tastes were still conservative—far more so than in continental Europe—and responses to music with a warped or elusive sense of tonality were typically abrasive. Listeners found it immoral and offensive when composers would abandon the traditional English methods in favor of more extreme and experimental trends.⁴² Not only was this piece technically characteristic of a later time, the message and execution of identity reclamation transcends music of provincial 1940s Wales and ought to solidify her place as one of the most progressive female composers of the twentieth century. However, if British musical tastes were so unsupportive of this new, tonally ambiguous style, why was the music of composers like Debussy, Vaughan Williams, and Mahler received in such a successful light?

Towards the end of her life, Grace Williams was offered the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire (OBE). Remarkably, she turned down the honor, in hopes that her music would stand on its own. Unfortunately,

⁴² Mathias, Rhiannon. Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music, 141.

despite her sophisticated and varied output, her contributions would be forgotten in history, overshadowed by the works of her male contemporaries. Grace Williams might have felt that her gender did not affect her success throughout her lifetime, but can that sentiment still hold after her death? It seems that, while it might not have hindered her ability to find success during her lifetime, it certainly has contributed to her erasure following her death in 1977, and furthermore persisted into the twenty-first century. Parsons and Ravenscroft illustrate:

Research presentations on music by women composers in scholarly fora such as the Society for Music Theory (SMT) annual meetings also remain infrequent. Since 1994, of 1,372 SMT conference presentations, only 34, or 2.47 percent, were on compositions by women. This ratio is skewed upward, however, by the fact that 19 of the 34 papers were presented in special sessions sponsored by the Society's Committee on the Status of Women in 2001, 2002, and 2010, making these annual conferences the only ones in the Society's history to include more than three presentations on music by female composers; the rate for the other 17 conferences over this period is 1.41 percent. This low representation of women composers in theoretical and analytical presentations is paralleled in the European scholarly environment, where 1.98 percent (11 of 555) of the papers in 14 recent conferences focused on music by women.⁴³

Williams refused many of the accolades and nominations offered throughout her lifetime on the grounds that awards should not be the overwhelming factor that determines the worth and quality of her music. Instead, Williams hoped her music would stand the test of time on its own: a wish that we know now did not come true. If music by women is not being

⁴³ Parsons, Laurel, and Brenda Ravenscroft. *Analytical Essays on Music by Women Composers: Concert Music 1960-2000*.

studied, analyzed, presented or performed, how do we maintain the legacy of these phenomenal composers who have contributed to an entire nation's musical evolution? Only through active efforts of performers, concert programmers, teachers, and—indeed as I hope to have shown—music analysts, can we begin to provide an answer to this question that honors the legacy of figures like Grace Williams.

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