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| Lutyens, Elisabeth (1906–1983) |
| Lutyens, Agnes Elizabeth |
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| (Agnes) Elisabeth Lutyens, CBE, was an English composer, credited with helping to establish the twelve-tone method of serialism in Britain. Lutyens’ first major composition using this technique, *Three Pieces for Orchestra*, Op. 7, was premiered in London on the first night of the blitz in 1940. Lutyens insisted she came upon this technique herself, and was not inspired by the work of Arnold Schoenberg, who is acknowledge as the pioneer of the technique, in which the notes of the chromatic scale are ordered into a series that functions as a unifying principle for harmony, melody and variation – all twelve notes of the scale are sounded an equal number of times in a composition to ensure no emphasis on any one. Lutyens often coupled this specialised atonal technique with literary and philosophical text, setting to music writers such as Joyce, Wittgenstein, Beckett, and Dylan Thomas, to create a music both praised and critiqued as intellectualised. She broke early from her juvenile setting of religious texts and her belief that music was a spiritual experience, choosing instead a practice that located significance in systematic patterns; this reflected a break with her mother’s religion of Theosophy. Jiddu Krishnamurti, the Theosophist group’s incarnated World Leader, lived with the Lutyens family between 1911 and 1921, and in 1923 her mother took Elisabeth and her sister Mary, via Austria and India, to a Theosophical Community in Australia, overseen by Charles Leadbeater. Lutyens had also travelled alone to Paris in 1923 where she discovered the music of Debussy, which she claimed as a great influence; in 1924, she split from her mother’s next pilgrimage to California, and enrolled in the Royal College of Music. One of her early works was composed for the ballet *The Birthday of the Infanta* (1932). As a student she made many acquaintances, including composers Benjamin Britten (whom she disliked), and Alan Rawsthrone, Elizabeth Maconchy, and William Walton, who remained long-term friends and colleagues. Her most significant piece from this period was her Chamber Concerto No. 1 (1939–1940) for nine instruments. Later war-time compositions such as *Three Salutes for the United Nations* (1941–1943) and *Proud City* (1945) were more tonal, and patriotic, but 1946 saw new developments in her style and twelve-tone method in *O Saisons, O Châteaux!* However, the 1940s for her were a struggle to find work, and reflected a greater battle for recognition, not only for an intensely intellectualised music, but, as Lutyens believed, for a woman in a ‘man’s world’. Early reviews often mentioned her father, renowned architect Sir Edwin Lutyens, and she also struggled to be recognised as a composer and not as a ‘female composer’. At the time, she was part of the Fitzrovia scene, drinking with Francis Bacon and Dylan Thomas. Her alcoholism worsened towards the end of the decade and she suffered a breakdown in 1948 (In 1952, she received chemical treatment for her drinking). However, in the same period, Lutyens was offered her first commission for an entire film, the documentary *Jungle Mariners* (1944), and another *The Pit* (1947). She also received her first BBC commission, for poet Louis MacNeice’s play *Enter Caesar* (1946). Later documentaries included *The Boy Kumasenu* (1952), *Little Arden* (1955) and *The Weald of Kent* (1959), narrated by John Betjeman. Her first feature film was the romantic comedy *Don’t Bother to Knock* (1960), but her style was better suited for horror, and she arranged the music for films including *The Earth Dies Screaming* (1964) and *The Skull* (1965). In 1947, Humphrey Searle arranged an entire concert of her work and the journal *Les Temps Modernes* proclaimed her the future of modern British music. The first performance of *O Saisons! O Châteaux!* in 1949 was a turning point in her career and she played a bigger part in the British music scene during the 1950s. String Quartet No. 6 (1952) demonstrated a mature work. Other important compositions include *Requiem for the Living* (1948), *Valediction* (1953–1934)for clarinet and piano, Nocturnes (1954) for guitar, violin and cello, Music for Orchestra I (1953–1935), and *Quincunx* (19591–1960), described as a ‘stream of musical consciousness’ by Anthony Payne. Her work received its greatest critical reception during the 1960s, with *Quincunx* receiving the best reviews of her career to that date. From the late 1960s, she was less dogmatic in her use of the twelve-tone method. Lutyens also received more work from the BBC, as William Glock, BBC Controller of Music, commissioned more modern music. Compositions of note from her later career include *Catena* (1961), which set Chaucer, Joyce, Dylan Thomas, Shakespeare, and Dryden to music, and was prefaced with Eliot’s *Waste Land*: ‘These fragments I have shored against my ruins’. A setting of Swinburne in *The Hymn of Man* (1965) showcased her distaste for organised religion. *Essence of Happiness* (1968) used Donne’s sermons, and *Anerca* (1970) was written for no fewer than ten guitars. *Driving Out The Death* (1971), for oboe and string trio, remains Lutyens’ most performed work. In 1972, she published her autobiography, *A Goldfish Bowl*. Music for Orchestra IV (1981) was her last full orchestral work. |
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