

Wendy Beckett, *Peggy Glanville-Hicks*

Pymble, N.S.W.: Angus & Robertson, 1992. \$14.95, pp. xi, 202

In the preface to *Peggy Glanville-Hicks*, Wendy Beckett clearly states that this biography is more a story than a record of established fact. She admits that Peggy herself had undoubtedly varied and embroidered many of the intriguing anecdotes which are her life stories.

It was also clear from the preface that Beckett was more interested in Peggy the person—and her life experience—than in the music she actually composed. This is understandable given that Beckett is a playwright and not a musicologist. Glanville-Hicks is a fascinating character, and as a woman in a totally male-dominated field her biography makes very interesting reading. However, it is disappointing that Beckett did not set out to discuss the music more fully in the book, as almost all of the other information and literature on Glanville-Hicks also focuses on the person without considering her music in any depth.

To begin with, I was impressed to find a book which would discuss Glanville-Hicks—and to some extent her work—in its sociological context as well as being written in a style that is accessible to a general readership. Beckett had interviewed Peggy many times and I found it interesting to read the biographical material together with Beckett's personal accounts of her interactions with Peggy.

After the first few chapters, however, I began to find that the storyline became quite disjointed. An event would be brought up in one context and then in another in such a way as to make the chronological sequence of events very difficult to follow. I was also occasionally disturbed by changes in writing style. For example, Beckett changes from writing about Peggy in the past tense to narrating a scene from the past with Peggy as subject. It seemed that the book was torn between being an informative biography and a casual novel, although in some places it successfully achieves a

balance between the two.

The lack of musical knowledge and discussion was particularly irritating when it came to the mention of Glanville-Hicks's opera, *Sappho*. Beckett correctly states that Glanville-Hicks used Lawrence Durrell's play, *Sappho*, for the libretto of her opera. She then outlines the myth of Sappho in the usual way, stating its 'preoccupation with the feminine in Greek mythology' and 'romantic lesbian love'. Beckett even suggests that the 'lesbian content' of the opera may be part of the reason it has never been performed (pp. 172-74). Unfortunately, the story of Sappho used for Glanville-Hicks's opera does not contain any lesbian material at all. In fact, Sappho is married to a male, Kreon, and also takes another male lover. The drama in the story is created by Kreon discovering that his wife, Sappho, is actually the daughter of his first wife. The San Francisco Opera Company, who commissioned *Sappho*, gave two main reasons for not performing the opera: its perceived abundance of modal tonality and lack of dramatic timing. It was a shame to see such little research being put into these aspects of Glanville-Hicks's life and work.

I will conclude by saying that the book is definitely worth reading in order to become acquainted with one of Australia's prominent composers; however, details should be checked if fact is important. I am left feeling that, at present, the interest in Glanville-Hicks comes about because of the fact that she did compose rather than because of the music that resulted. I suppose that once we get over the shock of a woman achieving some success as a composer in the music world, we will hear more about the sound of her music!

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