

The Indomitable Margaret Sutherland: Marriage, Family and Creativity

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Margaret Sutherland is regarded as one of the most innovative and influential Australian composers of the early and middle years of the twentieth century. Her impact was felt not only through her composition, but also through her efforts in promoting other Australian composers and performers and music in general in Melbourne. Available sources, both primary and secondary, present the picture that marriage and motherhood restricted Sutherland, and that her creativity increased greatly following her divorce. Using a methodology derived from feminist biographical theory, this article will aim to re-assess this viewpoint.

It will be demonstrated that Sutherland's personality and strength of character contributed significantly to the maintenance of a productive and publicly active life in spite of a difficult marriage. In order to achieve this, an attempt will be made within the limited scope of this article to provide an overview of Sutherland's situation during the years of her marriage. Four relevant issues will be taken into consideration – personality, marriage, productivity and other activities. Descriptive examples of elements of Sutherland's personality will be provided, followed by a discussion of her marital situation. This information has been gleaned from a number of mostly short, unpublished, autobiographical notes that Sutherland left, and from interviews the writer has conducted with people who knew her and/or her husband, Norman Albiston. An outline of Sutherland's compositional output both during and after her marriage will be given, and finally a summary of her other public activities. Where appropriate, the social and intellectual climate of the time will be mentioned. Firstly, however, an explanation will be provided of those aspects of feminist biographical theory which form the basis of the approach taken in this article.

Feminist biographers try to provide a view of the whole person, presenting negative and positive personality traits and life events, acknowledging that these elements contribute to or motivate the subject's achievements. They are mindful of the connections between private and public lives; therefore they consider the impact of family relationships, domestic and family commitments and supportive friendships,¹ and take into account internal as well as external change. They aim to weave social context into the narrative, since they acknowledge

¹ Sara Alpern, et al., eds, 'Introduction,' *The Challenge of Feminist Biography* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992) 5.

that a subject does not exist in heroic isolation, but is a social product located within a social milieu.² The question should be asked: 'what was the environment in which the subject developed something other than a traditional life?' Finally, a less linear, chronological narrative is an aim, the emphasis being not only on *when* and *what* their subjects achieved, but also on *how* they achieved it. It should be noted that many biographies of men also now exhibit a broader approach, taking male gender issues into consideration.³

As Elizabeth Wood has said, perhaps the ultimate goal of a biographer who chooses a female composer as a subject is to encourage readers to want to 'return to rehear the music once we have heard the personal voice in its historical, cultural, social and musical time, place and milieu.'⁴ Traditional musicological research has not always attached much importance to personal, social and domestic issues, considering them irrelevant to musical discourse. However, the problems of women's participation in musical, or any form of creativity, can only be revealed when aspects of women's experience are exposed.⁵ As Kay Dreyfus has pointed out, taking a product-centred approach alone to someone like Margaret Sutherland is inadequate.⁶

The following three quotes are indicative of this 'product-centred' approach, and reflect the prevailing attitude that the years of Sutherland's marriage were not particularly productive ones:

Her marriage in 1926, and the demands of a growing family of two children, gave less time for composition. In fact, it was not until after 1948, when she and her husband had parted, that her composition blossomed with renewed vigour in the most productive phase of her life.⁷

... she married Dr Norman Albiston, a psychiatrist, and for the next twenty years divided her life between rearing two children and writing when she was able – a period she calls a hiatus as far as composition was concerned for she had no real leisure or privacy for writing; and although she wrote many songs and some chamber works, it was not until the 1940s that there was opportunity to write more and larger works.⁸

When she and her husband parted in 1948 Sutherland went to Europe for a period of time and began the most productive two decades of her creative life.⁹

These brief summaries are too simplistic, and concentrate on what Sutherland *didn't* achieve, rather than on what she *did*. We are left with a picture of 'woman as victim,' with the implication

² Liz Stanley, *The Auto/Biographical I: The Theory and Practice of Feminist Auto/Biography* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992) 8.

³ Alpern, *Feminist Biography*, 8.

⁴ Ruth A. Solie, 'Changing the Subject,' *Current Musicology* 53 (1993): 63.

⁵ Jill Halstead, *The Woman Composer: Creativity and the Gendered Politics of Musical Composition* (London: Ashgate, 1997) 67.

⁶ Kay Dreyfus, 'In Search of New Waters: Australian Music Studies in the 1990s,' *Essays in Honour of David Evatt Tunley*, ed. Frank Callaway (Perth: CIRCME, The University of Western Australia, 1995) 159.

⁷ Laughton Harris, 'Margaret Sutherland,' *Australian Composition in the Twentieth Century*, ed. Frank Callaway and David Evatt Tunley (Melbourne: OUP, 1978) 31.

⁸ Joyce Garretty, *Three Australian Composers*, MA thesis, University of Melbourne, 1963, 51.

⁹ Jane Weiner LePage, 'Margaret Sutherland, 1897–1984: Composer, Pianist, Teacher,' *Women Composers, Conductors, and Musicians of the Twentieth Century: Selected Biographies*, vol. 3 (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 1988) 254.

that those years were wasted in terms of her career—that she really didn't write much of significance for about twenty-two years. Such over-simplification is not useful in evaluating a life such as Sutherland's, whose achievements could be said to have resulted from the fact that she did not become a 'victim.' Indeed she appears to have resisted conforming to one of the few plots available to women of her time. Although Sutherland has admitted there were periods during her marriage when her domestic situation meant she could write only intermittently,¹⁰ her overall output during these years was not significantly lower than after her divorce. She also found time to be heavily involved in many other activities, apart from responsibilities in the domestic sphere. This can be attributed to aspects of her personality, particularly determination and the single-minded pursuit of goals and principles she believed to be worthwhile.

Descriptions by Melbourne people who had close connections with Sutherland provide some insight into her personality. She has been referred to as confrontational, arrogant, ambitious, venomous, horrible, sarcastic, bitter, impatient, dogmatic, depressive, determined, charming, emotional, nurturing, idealistic and passionate.¹¹ However, to set some of these adjectives in context, women earlier this century who stood out from the crowd were often seen as bad according to one or other of society's rules.¹² Anger, for example, was not encouraged in women; neither was overt ambition or a desire for power over their own lives.¹³

It certainly appears that Sutherland evoked extreme opinions in those who knew her – she was either loved or hated. However those who disliked her still maintained that she had a truly original style of composition. Those who loved her thought her a genius as a composer and considered her teaching to be most innovative and inspiring.¹⁴ Her admiring friends were willing to support her wholeheartedly in the various causes for which she fought, but agreed that she had a strong personality and could be confrontational. However, they acknowledged that these qualities were a requirement for an ambitious and highly talented female composer trying to survive in a country where local composition was still undervalued, where new musical ideas were not easily received, and where there was little sympathy for the notion of a woman wanting to make a career as a composer.

Sutherland was a member of an extended bourgeois liberal, intellectual family in which stimulating, idealistic discussions on such subjects as politics and literature had been the norm. Her three aunts, artist Jane, singer Jessie and piano teacher Julia were particularly important role models. She was brought up in an atmosphere which encouraged her to develop her own ideals and opinions, and she was not afraid to voice them. For example, she referred to the 'quite maniacal jealousy of another member of the university staff who had schemed to bring about the downfall' of Professor Marshall Hall, who had been dismissed for writing and publishing a seemingly provocative book of verses called *Hymns Ancient and Modern*.¹⁵ She

¹⁰ James Murdoch, transcript of taped interview with Margaret Sutherland, 3 Apr. 1968, Murdoch Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 8372.

¹¹ Helen Gifford, interview with the author, 16 Sep. 1999; Jane Bunney, interview with the author, 20 Jan. 2000; and others interviewed who wish to remain anonymous.

¹² Solie, 'Changing the Subject,' 57.

¹³ Carolyn G. Heilbrun, *Writing A Woman's Life* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1988) 13.

¹⁴ Elizabeth van Rompaey, interview with the author, 7 Oct. 1999.

¹⁵ Margaret Sutherland, 'Three Universities in One,' unpublished undated ts., Sutherland Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 2967, 6.

was also very angry at the denunciation as an enemy alien during World War I of her Czech piano teacher, Edward Goll, who was dismissed at the end of 1914 from his position at the Marshall Hall Conservatorium in Albert Street, East Melbourne. This, she said 'set her youthful blood on fire,' and made her 'stonily defiant,' leading to her move to the University of Melbourne Conservatorium with Goll in 1915.¹⁶

An obvious example of Sutherland's determined character is the fact that she would not give up her plan to take her first trip overseas to study. This she undertook in spite of the fact that her meagre teaching wages made it very difficult to save the money, and under the trying circumstances created by the serious illness suffered by her sister, together with her mother's sudden death shortly before her departure. Sutherland did not hesitate to criticise other composers, especially those who she felt were only out for commercial gain. It also appears that she remonstrated with musicians who could not perform her music as she thought it should be performed. It was one of these musicians who referred to her as 'venomous and horrible.'

Her views on music education were quite non-conformist. In her autobiographical article 'Young Days in Music,' she made mention of the 'out-moded curriculum' at the University of Melbourne Conservatorium following the death of Marshall Hall. She felt this curriculum, which consisted of first and second studies, harmony, counterpoint, history, aesthetics, form and analysis, had been proven in Europe to 'dry up any spark of genuine creativity because of rigidity and lack of spontaneity.'¹⁷ She also felt strongly that 'Examinations and competitions must be placed in their proper perspective—a means to an end, not an end in themselves,'¹⁸ and she would not enter her students in AMEB exams.¹⁹

Sutherland's commitment to idealism is apparent in the following quote from 'Young Days in Music':

One has to be about eleven or twelve years of age, I believe, to begin to see for oneself the significance of ideals and principles, their activating forces, and the philosophy of life that stems from them. A gradual, undefined realisation came to me then which has stayed with me through all the endless ups and downs of a fairly choppy existence. It was the concept that true greatness is simplicity, and that simplicity is the essence of all greatness.²⁰

Although Sutherland was an accomplished performer, she was much more driven to be a composer, even though the Australian environment was not encouraging. It was difficult to find encouragement, as Thérèse Radic pointed out, in a world where all the real composers were European, male and dead. Nor was it easy to make a living through composition—teaching and performing were more financially rewarding.²¹ Sutherland said, however:

¹⁶ Margaret Sutherland, 'Young Days in Music,' *Overland* 40 (Dec. 1968): 25.

¹⁷ Sutherland, 'Young Days in Music' 26.

¹⁸ Margaret Sutherland, 'Accent on Music-Making,' *Meanjin Papers* 2/2 (Winter 1943): 40.

¹⁹ Murdoch, transcript, 3 Apr. 1968.

²⁰ Sutherland, 'Young Days in Music' 24.

²¹ Thérèse Radic, 'Still Life with Mirrors,' *The Half-Open Door*, ed. Patricia Grimshaw and Lynne Strahan (Sydney: Hale & Iremonger, 1982) 45.

On the other hand to pluck music from the air, and fashion it according to one's own whim, is quite another thing. That was what made my heart beat faster. And that was what I longed passionately to have time and opportunity to do.²²

In order to provide some insight into the circumstances under which Sutherland composed, her marital situation will now be investigated. It is, of course, impossible to comprehend completely the intricacies of personal relationships. It is possible, however, through reference to autobiographical notes by Sutherland written some years after her divorce, to gain some knowledge of her own perceptions of the relationship, and its effect on her. It is also important to respect the validity of her own reflections on her life. It should also be noted that Albiston's third wife presents a different view of him; they appear to have been a well-matched couple who enjoyed a very satisfying relationship.²³



Figure 1. Albiston with son Mark, c. 1935 (held in private collection of Sutherland's papers by her grandson, Tony Bunney).

Sutherland met Dr Norman Albiston during a country concert tour she made to Port Fairy in 1923, when his first wife had recently left him. He had a strong interest in the arts, but was given three career alternatives by his father, a professor of Theology at the University of Melbourne—the Church, law or medicine. He chose the latter, but followed Sutherland to

²² Sutherland, 'Young Days in Music' 27.

²³ Val Cohen, interview with the author, 25 Jan. 2000.

London in the 1920s, apparently with the idea that he might also pursue studies in music.²⁴ This did not happen, however, and eventually he decided to undertake further medical study to become a psychiatrist. The couple married in Melbourne, on 31 July 1927, and had two children, Mark (1929) and Jennifer (1931). According to Sutherland, she continued teaching to earn money for nine years after her marriage, paying all household expenses, buying the children's clothes and paying for their schooling, so that Albiston could establish himself in his career as a psychiatrist. Although it was traditional for a middle-class wife to provide her husband with emotional and domestic support, it was less common for her to provide financial support through paid work.²⁵

From quite early on in the marriage, the couple appeared not to be well-matched, and increasingly they went their separate ways. Sutherland wrote that she continued to hope things would improve, and thus confided in no-one for many years. Indeed her situation might have appeared unique to her, bearing in mind that such problems were usually borne in silence. She said that after she gave up teaching, it was very difficult to extract money from her husband for household expenses.²⁶ She had also bought a car when they had first married, which he believed to be his property entirely.²⁷ According to a friend of Albiston, who had herself experienced his intense interest in people with careers in music, his first wife had become rather annoyed with his avid musical interest. Albiston's friend also felt that he might have interfered too much in Sutherland's work, possibly requiring some sort of ownership or control over it. This, coupled with the fact that he was musically talented enough himself to be aware of her gifts, but not talented enough to match them, could have led to resentment on his part. It was also reported that he was overheard early in the marriage to say that he wanted to 'take her down a peg or two' because, although he thought her beautiful and had wanted to marry her, he felt that she had too many airs and graces.²⁸ This is perhaps another indication of his need for control in the marriage.

According to Sutherland, Albiston did not spend much time at home, sometimes neglecting his practice, for which she had to make excuses. He also had a number of affairs, and when she confronted him about his affair with the woman who was eventually to become his third wife, he gathered up all Sutherland's music and threatened to throw it in the river. It took a solicitor's order to persuade him not to destroy it.²⁹ Sutherland felt that Albiston did not understand what writing music was really about, and was unsympathetic to her need to compose, partly because he thought her passion was directed more towards composition than to him.³⁰ In spite of this, she still managed to compose when, she says, she found it possible to 'break out,' sometimes by going to stay elsewhere so that she could write.³¹

²⁴ Stuart Rosewarne, 'The Sutherland Family,' unpublished ts., 14 Nov. 1978, 36.

²⁵ Drusilla Modjeska, 'Rooms of their Own: The Domestic Situation of Australian Women Writers between the Wars,' *Women, Class and History: Feminist Perspectives on Australia 1788-1978*, ed. Elizabeth Windschuttle (Melbourne: Fontana/Collins, 1980) 343.

²⁶ Margaret Sutherland, unpublished note Nov. 1960 (held in private collection of Sutherland's papers by her grandson, Tony Bunney).

²⁷ Margaret Sutherland, '1920 and So On,' unpublished undated ts., Sutherland Papers, National Library of Australia, MS 2967.

²⁸ Bunney, interview, 20 Jan. 2000.

²⁹ Sutherland, unpublished note, Nov. 1960.

³⁰ Rosewarne, 'The Sutherland Family' 55.

³¹ Mel Pratt, transcript of taped interview, 5 Apr. 1972, Oral History Section, National Library of Australia, TRC 121/31.

Bearing in mind the picture provided of Sutherland's character and ambitions, it is difficult to imagine how she would have tolerated 'playing second fiddle' to her husband. The safety and (en)closure of marriage previously held out to be an ideal of female destiny may not have suited Sutherland, or any woman for that matter, who was ambitious and wanted a broader, more adventurous experience of life.³² She is likely to have found it difficult to fit the then existing socially prescribed, submissive role for a married woman, which included as its most important task the provision to her husband of emotional and domestic support to enable him to pursue his career unimpeded. As Helen Gifford stressed, women were not expected to be rivals to their husbands, but to live their lives through their husbands and children. Two questions might well be asked: why did such a woman marry such a man and have children, particularly given that she did have strong role models of creative women who remained single, including her three aunts and her composition teacher at school, Mona McBurney? Further, given the unhappy circumstances of the marriage, why did she remain married for twenty-one years?

In answer to the first question, Albiston is reported to have been a handsome, witty, charming, urbane, cultured man, who was involved in the rather new and rare field of psychiatry, and who would have been seen as a quite a catch. He pursued her tenaciously, and the anticipated financial security may well have been attractive to Sutherland, given that it was, and still is, hard to make a living as a composer. She was certainly familiar with the experience of living in financially precarious circumstances, given that her father and four uncles had all died relatively young, of the same heart condition. Women who remained single, for whatever reasons, were seen to have failed in some way, were restricted in professional opportunities, and were often financially dependent on a relative.³³ The experience of motherhood appears to be one Sutherland wanted, since she herself had alluded to the mother instinct being the 'life blood of any nation, and the world *must* go on going round, mustn't it?'³⁴ Sutherland would also have been aware and accepting of the fact that certain career sacrifices needed to be made if marriage and children were to be a part of her life. She acknowledged that her uncle John's writings had influenced her in this regard. To counter the argument of the evolutionists, he had written papers maintaining that women were not inferior, but that their domestic role was unavoidable because of their responsibility to preserve the race.³⁵

To answer the second question, one of her less avid admirers suggested that given her antagonistic character, even if she had divorced Albiston earlier, there was no way she would ever have found another man! However, the issue is somewhat more complex. Between the wars expectations were changing, and marriage was starting to be viewed more critically.³⁶ Nevertheless, the stigma of divorce—particularly for couples with younger families—was stronger earlier in the century than now, and the divorce laws less favourable to women.

³² Heilbrun, *Woman's Life* 20.

³³ Modjeska, 'Rooms of their Own' 346-347.

³⁴ Margaret Sutherland, 'How to Live in a Room-and-a-Bit (And Still Keep your Reason—And your Piano)', unpublished undated note (held in private collection of Sutherland's papers by her grandson, Tony Bunney) 3.

³⁵ Rosewarne, 'The Sutherland Family' 49.

³⁶ Modjeska, 'Rooms of their Own' 332.

Sutherland obviously felt the responsibility to protect her children, one example of this is her reference to having made up her mind to end the marriage when the children were 18 and 16, when they were 'old enough to examine things for themselves.'³⁷

Clearly, there were periods during the course of her marriage when Sutherland found it very difficult to compose music. However, she does not appear to have attributed these difficulties to her children, but more to her less-than-ideal marital situation. Indeed, she was committed to the idea of having a family, and had a housekeeper to help with domestic duties when the children were young which freed some time for teaching and other activities.³⁸ Although women's lives earlier this century were still dominated by the domestic responsibilities they were expected to take on as a result of marriage and children, domestic help was not uncommon in middle-class families, and was certainly necessary if women were to find any time to themselves.³⁹

To demonstrate that Sutherland remained very productive during her marriage, an outline of her compositional output during those years is useful. David Symons' book *The Music of Margaret Sutherland* includes the most up-to-date list of Sutherland's compositions, and an examination of it yields quite a surprising result. The overall number of compositions (around seventy) written during the twenty-one years of her marriage was actually higher than the number (around fifty-five) written between 1948, when the couple separated, and the late 1960s when she ceased being able to write music. After her divorce she wrote fewer vocal works, chamber works, and works for theatre. It was only in the orchestral genre that she produced more compositions. Her interest in orchestral composition had been awakened in the late 1930s and increased during the 1940s prior to her divorce, but most of her orchestral works were of quite modest dimensions.⁴⁰ While her children were young, she wrote the music for a number of songs for children, saying:

I didn't try to do anything on a scale I couldn't cope with. You can't with interruptions, you simply can't. I wrote a quartet for Piano, Clarinet, French Horn and Viola, simply because there were the players available.⁴¹

Indeed, she always enjoyed performing chamber music, and loved the intimacy of writing for a small group rather than a big orchestra.⁴² She thought a woman could contribute in a special kind of way: 'I don't think that women want to write the same type of things as men, but their contribution is no less important. They seem to have the same yardstick all the time, this symphonic business.'⁴³

While coping with a difficult marriage, bringing up children, teaching, composing, playing chamber music regularly⁴⁴ and giving recitals, Sutherland also made time for other activities. She lobbied ceaselessly for the Australian composer and music in general, disliking the

³⁷ Pratt transcript, 5 Apr. 1972.

³⁸ Rosewarne, 'The Sutherland Family' 48; Elizabeth van Rompaey, interview with author, 7 Oct. 1999.

³⁹ Modjeska, 'Rooms of their Own' 332.

⁴⁰ David Symons, *The Music of Margaret Sutherland* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1997) 70, 74, 131, 191-201.

⁴¹ Murdoch transcript, 3 Apr. 1968.

⁴² Symons, *Sutherland* 132.

⁴³ Murdoch transcript, 3 Apr. 1968.

⁴⁴ Murdoch transcript, 3 Apr. 1968.



Figure 2. Sutherland with daughter Jennifer, c. 1937 (held in private collection of Sutherland's papers by her grandson, Tony Bunney).

imported nature of music in Australia at that time. She also fought for the improvement of standards in music education. In 1934 and 1935, Sutherland won awards in several categories of composers' competitions organised by the ABC.⁴⁵ During World War II she became Secretary of the 'Women of the University Patriotic Fund' for two years, and helped organise and administer a day nursery in Kew for children whose mothers had joined the workforce. She also became heavily involved in organising for the 'Women of the University' a series of regular lunch-hour recitals which were part of the Red Cross war effort. These included works by Australian composers, and a series of 'Concerts for Young People.' She felt the war had given Australian music an opportunity to develop towards a national idiom, which led to the most notable achievement of ensuring that the site of the Victorian Arts Centre would be used for its current, public, purpose, rather than being sold to private enterprise. The Combined Arts Centre Movement (CACM), led by Sutherland with her good friend Lorna Stirling and John Lloyd, a public servant in the Victorian Titles Office, fought this battle for thirteen years from 1943, and were eventually successful. Sutherland was also a founding member of the Council of the National Gallery Society which, among other things, held annual music recitals. She helped found the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), later the

⁴⁵ Symons, *Sutherland* 18.

Arts Council of Australia. She regularly made applications to the Federal Government for music grants, unfortunately without much success, although her persistence in this regard led finally to her appointment to the Australian Music Advisory Committee for UNESCO during the Menzies era.⁴⁶ All these were activities she was involved in during her marriage.

In summary, it is necessary to delve deeper into aspects of a subject's life to come to a fuller understanding of what was achieved. To say that Sutherland's most prolific creative period occurred after her divorce is to belittle the huge achievements, both in composition and in other areas, made during a difficult marriage. It also suggests that the orchestral works produced later in her life were more valuable than her significant contribution to chamber music. As Sutherland pointed out, works for smaller groups should not be seen as less important. Indeed, the difficulties in her domestic life may have driven her to achieve in other areas. She admitted that her determined struggle for the Arts Centre could have had something to do with her unhappiness in other aspects of her life.⁴⁷ We know that at times during her marriage Sutherland found it difficult to allot the required 'brain space' to composition. However, the descriptions given of her personality, marital situation, creative output and other, public, activities suggest that she had the tenacity to avoid being smothered by the unhappiness of her circumstances, and to avoid allowing her ambitions to be diluted by domesticity. That being said, with marriage and child-rearing behind her, there is no doubt that Sutherland, to use the words of Adrienne Rich 'gave birth to ... a recognisable, autonomous self, a creation in poetry (or music in this case) and life.'⁴⁸ This Sutherland expresses herself in the following quote:

I had to make a completely new life. Bit by bit it grew. And I really began being grateful for a life that mattered ... Music came more and more possible. And music got written. There were of course some ghastly things, but life could sometimes become wonderful. It kept going.⁴⁹

⁴⁶ Symons, *Sutherland* 22.

⁴⁷ Pratt transcript, 5 Apr. 1972.

⁴⁸ Adrienne Rich, *Of Woman Born—Motherhood as Experience and Institution* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976) 7.

⁴⁹ Sutherland, '1920 and So On.'