

## BOOK REVIEW

---

**Jillian Graham. *Inner Song: A Biography of Margaret Sutherland***  
Melbourne University Press (The Miegunyah Press), 2023  
ISBN 9780522878233 (Hbk)/9780522878240 (e-book)  
xx+284pp., 37 ills

**Reviewed by Aidan McGartland**

Hailed as being both the ‘undisputed first lady of Australian music,’ and assuming the role of ‘grand old man’ of Australian music,<sup>1</sup> Margaret Sutherland is undoubtedly one of the nation’s most significant twentieth-century composers. Today, Sutherland’s ‘grandmotherly’ position is gradually gaining recognition, particularly due to her pioneering of musical modernism and advocating for gender equality in the Australian musical landscape.

Jillian Graham’s *Inner Song: A Biography of Margaret Sutherland* is the first monograph dedicated to exploring the composer’s life. The only other full-length monograph dedicated to Sutherland is David Symons’s *The Music of Margaret Sutherland* (1998), which focuses on chronologically analysing most of her output, making Graham’s new monograph an ideal complement. In *Inner Song*, Graham provides a thorough overview of Sutherland’s life and background that is presented in an engaging, personal style; the author affectionately refers to Sutherland as ‘Margaret’ throughout. Graham synthesises a narrative from her extensive archival research and analysis of primary sources, allowing her to thoroughly support each component of her interpretation of Sutherland’s life. As expected in a biography, the emphasis is on context rather than the music, except for stylistic commentary derived from Graham’s close reading of Sutherland’s letters, talks and interviews. Throughout the biography, Graham

---

<sup>1</sup> Graham quotes first the *Age* newspaper, then Thérèse Radic (pp. xiii, 203).

attempts to gain a holistic understanding of Sutherland beyond solely her role as a composer, and, using a feminist lens, she views Sutherland as a daughter, wife, mother, and as a strongly independent woman.

Due to the comprehensive nature of *Inner Song*, it is not possible to attempt to address every theme in the book, so I have selected three major topics to highlight in this review: Sutherland's engagement with musical modernism; her childhood; and the challenges she faced as a woman composer. Some notable omissions from my review include discussions of Sutherland's engagement with the Australian Broadcasting Commission, and her role in Melbourne's cultural evolution (notably her tireless campaigning for the construction of the Melbourne Arts Centre).

Throughout *Inner Song*, Graham discusses Sutherland's engagement with musical modernism,<sup>2</sup> as her early embrace of this movement was perhaps one of her greatest achievements. Notably, Sutherland was one of the first Australian composers to engage with modernism, and she developed a unique musical language by blending chromaticism and dissonance with an expressive lyricism. Graham supports the claim that Sutherland embraced a kind of 'soft' modernism, or a centrist position in the musical landscape of the first part of the twentieth century. It was during Sutherland's first sojourn in England (1923–1925) that she was first attracted to modernism; upon her arrival in England, she was reportedly unimpressed by the English pastoralism championed by Ralph Vaughan Williams (p. 56). Graham suggests that this may have been why Sutherland did not pursue study with Vaughan Williams, and was likely a factor in her decision not to enrol at the Royal College of Music (RCM), instead opting to study privately with the less 'pastoralist' Arnold Bax. Instead, Sutherland did hear 'new "tremendously non-English music,"' with Graham citing a wide-ranging list: Stravinsky's neoclassicism, Bartók's folk-inspired modernism, the French impressionism of Debussy and Ravel, the newly emerging Les Six, in addition to Eric Korngold and Richard Strauss (pp. 59–60). As well as illustrating the wide palette of contemporary music that Sutherland was exposed to, Graham's list demonstrates that Sutherland was interested primarily in modernism that was still rooted in tonality. This is consistent with Sutherland's rejection of the Second Viennese School—whose music she first heard in the mid-1920s—and serialism.

Graham notes that Sutherland said that 'music should be accessible and give pleasure,' and that she preferred 'to bend Western classical musical rules rather than break them' (p. 61), and that this bending was a key trait of her 'neoclassicism'. According to Graham, the rejection of serialism was particularly prominent in interwar England, unsurprisingly along with widespread anti-German sentiment after the Great War. Sutherland's anti-German point of view is reflected in her condemnation of Ethyl Smyth's *Mass in D* for being too much 'in the German style' (p. 61), and potentially was the reason for her failure to overtly credit Paul Hindemith as an influence, despite his inclusion in her 1956 talk, *Chant Intérieur* ('Inner Song'). However, Sutherland's dismissal of serialism is at odds with how she 'revered the music' of her close friend, the composer and serialist Don Banks (p. 61), as well as with her interest in other serialists whom she met, notably Keith Humble and Elisabeth Lutyens. It thus seems likely that Sutherland's anti-German sentiment was responsible for this dismissal,

---

<sup>2</sup> Referring to the momentous break from musical traditions that occurred at the start of the twentieth century, and which included the emancipation of dissonance and a shift towards atonality.

in contrast to her acceptance of Banks, given the obvious stylistic and technical differences between Banks's employment of serialism and that of the Second Viennese School.

Back in Australia, society—including musical life—was notably more conservative than in Europe. Writing about the slowness of musical modernism to take hold in Australia in contrast to modernism in the visual arts, Sutherland stated that 'music has always been the last to get going,' and lamented the lack of performances of Stravinsky in Australia (pp. 50–51). Interestingly, Graham observes that Sutherland did notice the backlash against modernism; as Graham states, the nationalism and paranoia of the Great War made Australia a hostile environment towards European modernism (p. 50). Perhaps, it was during these years that Sutherland decided against taking a more radical position, instead opting for the more moderate and accessible musical language described above. This compromise is evident in Sutherland's first major composition, *Sonata for Violin and Piano* (1925), which was viewed as being avant-garde in Australia, despite its resemblance to late Romanticism and French impressionism (p. 67).

Perhaps Graham's greatest achievement in *Inner Song* is her in-depth discussion of Sutherland's early childhood development. Despite childhood being a vital component in understanding the upbringing and background of a composer during their formative years, the topic is commonly ignored in musical biographies. Underpinning Graham's analysis appears to be Lev Vygostky's social constructivist theory of childhood development, which is centred on the idea that a child's cognitive development and learning are shaped by social interactions and their environment. In fact, Graham commences before Sutherland's birth, even exploring her Scottish roots to see what influences may have shaped her childhood. Graham documents the composer's well-educated, middle-class background, and, in particular, the free-thinking progressivism that would later shape Sutherland's political views, notably her unwavering advocacy for First Nations rights and environmentalism in the 1960s.

Graham reports that from a young age, Sutherland's family cared deeply about her education and development. Most notable among her family members was Jane Sutherland, a landscape painter and member of the Heidelberg School. Graham notes that Aunt Jane 'was a crucial model for her niece, as a woman who pursued a career in a male-dominated domain,' with Sutherland saying it informed her own 'challenging path' (p. 14). Sutherland's parents sent her to Baldur Girls Grammar in Kew in 1904, where she gravitated towards the school's music teacher, Mona McBurney, who was a concert pianist, teacher, and one of the few women composers of the time (p. 24). McBurney gave Sutherland her first composition lessons, covering the traditional domains of harmony, counterpoint, and orchestration in an engaging manner (p. 26). According to Graham, McBurney was another role model, and demonstrated to Sutherland that, despite many difficulties, being a woman need not prevent a career in the arts.

As expected in a biography of a woman composer, gender shaped Sutherland's life and is a major component of Graham's narrative. Sutherland is placed in an historically important position as a pioneer of women's rights, which is even more significant considering that Australia has one of the greatest percentages of women composers.<sup>3</sup> Despite being unlikely

---

<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Appleby states that 25% of Australian composers are women, 'a greater percentage of women composers than almost any other nation' (behind only Estonia). See *Women of Note* (Fremantle: Fremantle Press, 2012), 163.

to have used the 'feminist' label herself, Graham argues that Sutherland 'modelled a feminist existence' (p. 228).

As an example of the disadvantages Sutherland suffered as a woman, Graham cites Sutherland's overseas study at the RCM in London, where she did not 'officially' study attend the institution, instead studying privately, as noted above. Graham attributes this to Sutherland's general scepticism of institutions and asserts that women composers were held in contempt in such institutions; being from 'the colonies' would have further added to the burden of marginalisation (p. 56). However, Graham places Sutherland first in a long line of Australian women who studied composition abroad at the RCM in the 1930s: Esther Rofe, Peggy Glanville-Hicks, Miriam Hyde, and Dulcie Holland (p. 55). It is not clear whether Sutherland actively mentored these younger composers, or was more of a distant but nonetheless important role model. Nonetheless, Graham observes that Sutherland's long-lasting influence can still be positively felt today on the careers of Australian women composers such as Katy Abbott (p. 230).

Graham devotes a sizeable portion of *Inner Song* to discussing the 'hideous' twenty-one years of Sutherland's marriage to Melbourne psychiatrist, Dr Norman Albiston (p. 83). Graham writes that while Sutherland's initial opinions on marriage and motherhood are not known, she did 'conform – in part... [and] took pride in maintaining a pleasant home environment, though she felt the burden of household tasks' (p. 86). Of course, being a wife and a mother, as well as assisting in her husband's private practice put a strain on Sutherland's musical life. Nevertheless, Graham outlines how Sutherland continued composing, performing and teaching at the University Conservatorium during her marriage. Graham argues that while music initially drew Sutherland and Albiston together, it became a source of resentment, and led to his jealousy of Sutherland's musical 'brilliance' (p. 89–90).

Sutherland's compositions during the time of her marriage include a number of works for children—including her own children—a choice potentially influenced by her husband, as he only approved of composition 'as long as [it] was for children,' dismissing the rest of her oeuvre (p. 105). However, Graham challenges the general view that Sutherland was merely a powerless victim during her marriage and did not compose. Although Sutherland downplayed her own compositions of this time, Graham demonstrates that, while Sutherland reduced her output, she nonetheless composed around eighty works in this period. In short, Graham argues that to dismiss these compositions would be to simply ignore her remarkable determination during this difficult time, and that these works—including the works for children—should not be devalued.

After Sutherland's separation in 1947, Graham asserts that her musical style changed (in agreement with Symons's view), reflecting her new independence. Her post-war style contains fewer Romantic gestures and is more neoclassical, as typified by *Six Profiles* (c. 1946) and the Sonata for Clarinet and Piano (1947). Sutherland then began to embrace larger orchestral forms, such as in her tone poem, *Haunted Hills* (1950), and the Concerto for Violin and Orchestra (1960), as she aspired to be viewed as a 'serious' composer, in addition to maintaining her continued interest in the more 'feminine' chamber music (p. 104). Graham notes that, traditionally, larger-scale works have been more challenging for women composers, with the additional burden of these large genres being more highly valued in the Western canon (p. 104).

In 1969, shortly after receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Melbourne, Sutherland faced a difficult episode involving the newly founded Commonwealth Assistance

to Australian Composers scheme, which had begun a comprehensive survey to celebrate contemporary classical music in Australia. Sutherland was ultimately excluded from the resulting *Musical Composition in Australia* (pp. 209–10); all ten surveyed composers were men. However, Sutherland's exclusion did not go unnoticed, with discussion in the media, mainly in her defence. Graham suggests that the tense relationship between board member Bernard Heinze and Sutherland, as well as the likelihood of blatant misogyny from the all-male board in the resultant selection, may have been behind the exclusion.

I am confident that *Inner Song* will herald renewed musical and scholarly interest in Margaret Sutherland and her work. Graham's accessible and authoritative account draws from a wide range of primary sources and uncovers key historical facts rendering it a welcome and vital resource for anyone playing, listening to or studying Sutherland's music.

**About the Author**

Aidan McGartland is a doctoral student in music theory at McGill University, researching tonal and post-tonal theories, with particular interest in the music of Elisabeth Lutyens and Margaret Sutherland.