



Lyrita

# Grace Williams The Parlour

**A BBC recording**

Welsh National Opera Company  
Welsh National Opera Chorus  
City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra  
Conducted by Brian Balkwill

Edith Coates  
Edward Byles  
Noreen Berry  
Anne Pashley  
Janet Hughes  
Jean Allister  
David Lennox  
John Gibbs  
Marian Evans

# Grace Williams

## The Parlour

Words and Music by Grace Williams  
after the short story 'En Famille' by Guy de Maupassant

Grandmama (contralto)	Edith Coates
Papa, her son (tenor)	Edward Byles
Mama, her daughter-in-law (mezzo-soprano)	Noreen Berry
Louisa, her grand-daughter (soprano)	Anne Pashley
Augusta, her grand-daughter (soprano)	Janet Hughes
Aunt Genevieve, her daughter (mezzo-soprano)	Jean Allister
Uncle Steve, her son-in-law (tenor)	David Lennox
Doctor Charlton, her doctor (baritone)	John Gibbs
Rosalie, the family servant (soprano)	Marian Evans

The action takes place in a small seaport town  
towards the end of the nineteenth century

Scene I	A shabby-genteel Victorian living-room	31:40
Entr'acte	A street corner	03:50
Scene II	The living-room transformed into an ornate parlour	43:49
Total playing time		<b>79:32</b>

*Track details can be found in the libretto*

The premiere was given on 5 May 1966 at the New Theatre, Cardiff  
Welsh National Opera Company & Welsh National Opera Chorus  
City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, leader Felix Kok  
Conducted by Brian Balkwill, Produced by John Moody  
Broadcast live on BBC Network Radio.

**Produced in association with the BBC**



Cover image : The Bellelli Family. Edgar Degas (1834-1917) Google Art Project

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‘When I’m composing, not only have I to create music, I must also search for the best way of putting it across. It means being on the alert the whole time; writing - then criticizing what I’ve written – and if it won’t do, scrap it and start again – more criticism – and so on until I’ve done everything within my power to make the music live and flow naturally’.<sup>1</sup>

These insights from Grace Williams into her approach to the compositional process show her strong desire to communicate fluently and sincerely with her listeners. Also evident from this quotation is her professionalism, technical integrity and formidable capacity for self-criticism. She held herself and her art to the highest standards, withdrawing and destroying scores which failed to live up to her ideals. It can be inferred from this that she regarded the works which survived elimination as worthy of her musical legacy.

She was born in the coastal town of Barry, Wales on 19 February 1906, the eldest of three children of William Matthews Williams and his wife Rose Emily (née Richards), who were both schoolteachers. Her parents were music lovers, attending concerts and amassing a substantial and diverse collection of gramophone records and piano scores. The young Grace acted as accompanist for the Romilly Boys' Choir, which was conducted by her father. The choir had an international reputation and achieved considerable fame, performing for President Woodrow Wilson at the White House during a tour of North America and winning awards in Paris in 1912 and Liège in 1921.<sup>2</sup> Grace Williams later acknowledged the significance of these formative musical and choral experiences, remarking that, ‘music for me has got to flow, because I have been brought up in the singing tradition’.<sup>3</sup>

She was educated at Barry Girls' Grammar School. Her music teacher there was Rhyda Jones, who had recently graduated from University College of Wales, Aberystwyth (now Aberystwyth University), where she had been a pupil of Walford Davies. Grace’s early promise as a composer was never forgotten by her former teacher:

<sup>1</sup> ‘Grace Williams: a Self Portrait’, *Welsh Music*, Vol.8, No.5 (1986-87), p.10.

<sup>2</sup> David Ian Allsobrook, *Music for Wales: Walford Davies and the National Council of Music, 1918-1941* (Cardiff University of Wales Press, 1992), pp.79-80.

<sup>3</sup> ‘Views and Revisions: The Composer Grace Williams talks to A. J. Heward Rees’. *Welsh Music*, Vol.5, No.4 (1976-77), p.8.



‘She used to go down to the beach at Cold Knap and present a little composition to me every Thursday morning as a result: a song or a gavotte, etc. The creative urge was strong from the very beginning’.<sup>4</sup>

In 1923 Grace won the newly established Morfydd Owen Musical Scholarship to University College, Cardiff, where she studied music under David Evans,<sup>5</sup> who had also taught Owen.<sup>6</sup> She took her B.Mus. in 1926. Her years of study in Cardiff afforded few opportunities for original composition and she continued her musical education at the Royal College of Music in London, studying composition with Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacob. At college she became close friends with other student composers of her generation, Dorothy Gow, Imogen Holst and Elizabeth Maconchy. They met regularly to play their music to each other and exchange views on it. From this early shared creative experience grew a close, true friendship between Grace Williams and Elizabeth Maconchy, which lasted for half a century, maintained through personal contact and a regular exchange of letters. One of the most rewarding elements of this friendship, cherished by both women, was an honest, highly valued criticism of each other’s music.

In 1930, a travelling scholarship took Grace Williams to Vienna, where she completed her musical studies with the composer Egon Wellesz.<sup>7</sup> She later identified the key differences between Wellesz’s pedagogical methods and those of Vaughan Williams:

‘[Wellesz] was marvellous, and had so different an approach from Vaughan Williams, who was the sort of personality to whom you could only take your best music. Vaughan Williams knew his limitations as a teacher, though: he would say ‘I know there’s something wrong, but I can’t put my finger on it’, but Wellesz could. He had a way of saying, ‘It begins to get weak at this

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<sup>4</sup> ‘Grace Williams: a Symposium (Part 2)’, *Welsh Music*, Vol.5, No.7 (1977-78), p.56.

<sup>5</sup> Welsh composer, musician and academic David Evans (1874-1948) wrote hymns, anthems and orchestral music, as well as an oratorio *Llawenhewch yn yr lôr* (‘Rejoice in the Lord’), first performed at the Caernarfon Festival in 1906 and a dramatic cantata, *The Coming of Arthur*, premiered at the Cardiff Triennial Festival in 1907.

<sup>6</sup> The prolific output of Welsh composer, pianist and mezzo-soprano Morfydd Owen (1891-1918) includes songs, piano music, chamber works, pieces for mixed choir and orchestral scores.

<sup>7</sup> Born in Vienna, Egon Wellesz (1885-1974) was a composer, teacher and musicologist. In 1938 he emigrated to England, where he taught at Lincoln College, Oxford. His distinguished output includes nine symphonies, nine string quartets, six operas and choral and vocal works.

point, so you will scrap from here onwards and re-write'. But then he'd been a pupil of Schoenberg, whose method this was'.<sup>8</sup>

After returning to London in late 1931, she taught for several years at Camden School for Girls and at Southlands College of Education. During this time, she became a close friend of Benjamin Britten, who encouraged her to develop her creative talents. It was also through Britten that she started working for the Strand Film Company in 1936.

In February 1947 she came back to Barry, where she spent the rest of her life, in a self-contained flat in her parents' house. After her return to South Wales, she began to establish herself as a freelance composer, writing mainly for BBC schools programmes and producing film scores. In her last years she refused all further commissions so that younger composers might profit from the kind of support she herself had enjoyed from the BBC and the Welsh Arts Council. This typically selfless act at least enabled her to devote more time to writing songs and revising many of her earlier works. She died in Barry on 10 February 1977, a few days before her 71st birthday.

Modest and reserved by nature, Grace Williams was much loved by her friends, colleagues and fellow composers. Her opinions on music and other matters were carefully formed, very decided and highly esteemed. Elizabeth Maconchy described her as 'my oldest friend' and recalled 'how courageously she held to her own views', with 'an independent mind and excellent judgment'.<sup>9</sup> According to Dorothy Gow, music 'seemed to be the very essence of her being, and seemed to flow from her so easily',<sup>10</sup> while Imogen Holst remembered her as 'a real composer', who was 'utterly single-minded'.<sup>11</sup> David Wynne wrote that she 'was always most fastidious about craftsmanship' and 'succeeded in extracting from traditional compositional procedures fresh and stimulating music which bears the deep impress of a personal style'.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup> 'Views and Revisions', p.8.

<sup>9</sup> 'Grace Williams: A Symposium', *Welsh Music*, Vol.5, No.6 (1977), p.18.

<sup>10</sup> 'Grace Williams: A Symposium (Part 2)', p.46.

<sup>11</sup> 'Grace Williams: A Symposium', p.21.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p.30.

According to Arnold Whittall, 'No one could meet Grace Williams and talk to her about her music without realizing how honest her convictions were, how strong her creative integrity'.<sup>13</sup> A close friend, poet and teacher Vivien Cutting put it simply: 'She was all air and fire and no one was better named: Grace'.<sup>14</sup>

Her humanity and generosity of spirit may be summed up in a remark made in a letter she wrote, sixteen days before she died, to her great friend Elizabeth Maconchy: 'It's not what's happened to me, but that I've had the great good fortune to respond to so many wonderful things'.<sup>15</sup>

Much of her music was written to commissions from the BBC, the Royal National Eisteddfod and the Llandaff and Swansea Festivals. Her orchestral output includes a *Sinfonia Concertante* for piano and orchestra (1941), *Symphonic Impressions* (Symphony No.1) (1943, revised in 1952), *Sea Sketches*, for string orchestra (1944), Violin Concerto (1951), *Penillion* (1955), Symphony No.2 (1956, revised 1975), Trumpet Concerto (1963), Carillons for oboe and orchestra (1965, revised 1973) and *Ballads* (1968).<sup>16</sup> Among her choral pieces are *The Dancers*, for soprano, women's chorus, string orchestra and harp (1951), *Missa Cambrensis*, for SATB soloists, mixed chorus, boys' choir, orchestra and speaker (1971),<sup>17</sup> *Ave maris stella*, for unaccompanied chorus (1973)<sup>18</sup> and *Fairest of Stars*, for soprano and orchestra (1973).<sup>19</sup> She also wrote many songs<sup>20</sup> and instrumental and chamber music.<sup>21</sup> There are also scores for radio, theatre and the cinema, including *Blue Scar* (1949), which was the first feature film to be scored by a British woman.

Grace Williams wrote her only opera, *The Parlour*, between 1960 and 1961.<sup>22</sup> Prior

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<sup>13</sup> Arnold Whittall, 'Grace Williams 1906-77', *Soundings: A Musical Journal*, Vol.7 (1978), pp.24-25.

<sup>14</sup> 'Grace Williams: A Symposium (Part 2)', p.47.

<sup>15</sup> Letter from Grace Williams to Elizabeth Maconchy, 25 January 1977, in *Music, Life and Changing Times*, p.479.

<sup>16</sup> *Sea Sketches*, *Penillion*, Trumpet Concerto and *Carillons* feature on Lyrita SRCD.323 and Symphony No.2 and *Ballads* are included on Lyrita SRCD.327.

<sup>17</sup> Lyrita SRCD.442.

<sup>18</sup> *The Dancers* and *Ave maris stella* are on Chandos CHAN 9617.

<sup>19</sup> Lyrita SRCD.327.

<sup>20</sup> Lorelt (Lontano Records Ltd.) LNT140 and Naxos 8.571384.

<sup>21</sup> Naxos 8.571380.

to this, she had demonstrated in her songs and choral works a gift for setting texts sensitively and with an innately dramatic sensibility, while her previous large-scale orchestral works show a firm grasp of structure and developing long-term narratives. In addition, she had already embraced the strict discipline of creating vividly imaginative scores for very specific forces to tight deadlines in her film scores and in the 1949 radio fantasy *Rataplan*, originally conceived as a one-act opera. There is no doubt that her single music drama for the stage benefitted greatly from this accumulated, varied experience.

Her passion for opera began in her childhood home, which contained, among other scores, operatic duets and ‘The Prima Donna’s Album’. She recalled that ‘as a child I went to a great deal of plays, and to hear the opera-companies who used to come to Cardiff; as a family we used to go regularly to the Saturday matinees. I always loved the theatre: I belong [there] somehow’.<sup>23</sup> Her later experience as a teacher working on school productions of operas at Camden School for Girls also proved invaluable, as she later acknowledged, ‘... when I came to write my own opera *The Parlour*, it was a tremendous help, since I had worked with a member of staff who was a very gifted producer, and I learnt so much about stage-craft. Even though we had to make our own costumes and props the standard was rather high, I think’.<sup>24</sup>

When the Arts Council’s Welsh Committee approached her in the summer of 1959 with the offer of a commission to write a one-act opera, this was an opportunity to realise a long-cherished ambition. The Committee originally planned to commission an opera from Grace Williams and fellow Welsh composer Daniel Jones with a view to staging them together as a double bill by the Welsh National Opera,<sup>25</sup> as a ‘sort of Welsh Cav and Pag’, as Richard Fawkes put it<sup>26</sup>. Both commissions were completed, but a proposal to stage the operas together came to nothing<sup>27</sup> and Jones’s opera *The Knife*

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<sup>22</sup> The score is dated 25 August 1961.

<sup>23</sup> ‘Views and Revisions’, p.13.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, pp.12-13.

<sup>25</sup> According to a letter from Grace Williams to Elizabeth Maconchy dated 8 June 1959, it was Daniel Jones who ‘put the idea in their [WNO’s] heads’, published in eds. Sophie Fuller and Jenny Doctor, *Music, Life and Changing Times: Selected Correspondence Between British Composers Elizabeth Maconchy and Grace Williams 1927-77*, Vol. 1 (Routledge, 2020), p.179.

<sup>26</sup> Richard Fawkes, *Welsh National Opera* (Julia MacRae Books, 1986), 107.



(1961) went on to be premiered by the London-based New Opera Company at Sadler's Wells in December 1963. In private correspondence with Jones on 7 October 1965 and 10 May 1966, Grace Williams joked that she should have called her opera 'the Fork' to go with his 'Knife'.<sup>28</sup> In the event, as Rhiannon Mathias has pointed out,<sup>29</sup> she had the distinction of being the first woman in Wales to write an opera when *The Parlour* was first performed, together with Puccini's *Il Tabarro* (played, in English translation, as *The Cloak*), at New Theatre, Cardiff on 5 May 1966, by the WNO and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra conducted by Brian Balkwill.<sup>30</sup>

For her libretto, the composer turned to the French satirist Guy de Maupassant's savagely funny short story *En Famille*<sup>31</sup> in which the apparent demise of a cantankerous matriarch uncovers the greed of family members.<sup>32</sup> She wrote her own libretto for *The Parlour*, embellishing and refining Maupassant's story for dramatic purposes and transferring the setting from the banks of the Seine in France to the living room of a house in a Victorian seaside town. Structured in two scenes framing a brief interlude, the drama unfolds during a summer's day in 1870.

Scene 1: From the open window Grandmamma (contralto) is hurling abuse at the neighbours (SATB chorus). Her daughter-in-law (mezzo-soprano) remonstrates with her and Grandmamma retires to her upstairs room in her usual ill temper. Mamma muses on her careful, humdrum life and makes no attempt to hide her indignation when her husband (tenor) comes home with the news that he has been passed over again for promotion at the Navigation Office where he works. Their teenage daughters, Louisa and Augusta (sopranos) return from the harbour, where they have spent the

<sup>27</sup> In his book, *Welsh National Opera*, Richard Fawkes suggests the proposed double bill was dropped because both operas turned out to be around 90 minutes in length, so 'their pairing had seemed impractical'.

<sup>28</sup> Rhiannon Mathias, *Lutyens, Maconchy and Williams and Twentieth-Century Music: A Blest Trio of Sirens* (Ashgate, 2012), p.263.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Brian Balkwill (1922-2007) was music director of WNO from 1963 to 1967, succeeding Charles Groves.

<sup>31</sup> This story is mentioned as a possible subject for operatic treatment in correspondence between Grace Williams and Elizabeth Maconchy as early as January 1959, in *Music, Life and Changing Times*, Vol.1., p.173.

<sup>32</sup> According to Malcolm Boyd, in his book, 'Grace Williams', (1980, University of Wales Press, p.53), Maupassant's story was chosen by Grace Williams after Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott* and Vernon Lee's *Dionea* had been considered and rejected as possible subjects for an opera.

morning. When Grandmamma fails to answer the dinner gong Louise is sent upstairs to investigate and returns with the news that Grandmamma is lying 'flat on the floor'. Dr. Charlton is sent for and after a hasty examination pronounces her dead. While the two girls go to the post office with a telegram for Aunt Genevieve and Uncle Steve, Mamma, finding that her mother-in-law has left no will, persuades Papa to exchange Grandmamma's superior furniture for theirs before Genevieve has the chance to claim it for herself. Papa wonders what his boss will say when he fails to turn up at the office that afternoon, but he decides that a death in the family is good enough reason to be absent without notice and begins to do as his wife asks.

During the entr'acte, set in the street outside, the neighbours hear of Grandmamma's death and arrange to present their condolences at 7 o'clock that evening. Chimes in the orchestra represent the passing of time.

Scene 2: While the neighbours share in the family's grief, Louisa and Augusta enter and go up to Grandmamma's room. Later, when they ask why the furniture has been changed, Papa is evasive and Mamma annoyed. While Rosalie, the maid, goes in search of oil for the lamp, the daughters are sent upstairs again ('since they are not afraid') for a candle. They return with the startling news that Grandmamma is getting up and is coming downstairs. Her reappearance coincides with the arrival of Aunt Genevieve (contralto) and Uncle Steve (tenor), who take Grandmamma's part. Soon Dr. Charlton arrives with the undertaker, and Grandmamma decides that it is time she made a will. All her treasures will go to her daughter Genevieve. Informed by Augusta and Louisa of the latest turn of events, the neighbours arrive to see what is going on and soon find themselves on former terms with their old enemy. Grandmamma gets rid of them, says goodbye to Genevieve and Steve, instructs Papa to return her furniture immediately, and retires to bed. As Papa struggles with a sofa he suddenly reflects: what will he say to his boss now?<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Synopsis as presented in Malcolm Boyd's book, *Grace Williams* (University of Wales Press, 1980), p.53.

*The Parlour* reveals Grace Williams as a natural composer for the theatre, with a flair for character delineation and development. The fast pace means there is no time for a formal overture and the drama begins without preamble. The compact arias, ensembles, recitatives and choruses arise naturally from the music, which is continuous, and there are no long numbers to inhibit the flow of the narrative. As the composer admitted, 'There's quite a lot to say in a short time. So whatever else I'll be accused of, I hardly think anyone could say that the opera drags'.<sup>34</sup>

Her libretto is succinct, conversational and peppered with colourful, crisp colloquialisms, such as 'look sharp', 'what a to-do', 'up the pole', 'sound as a bell', 'what sauce' and 'to blazes with him'. Described by Malcolm Boyd as having a 'keen wit',<sup>35</sup> the text was singled out for praise by the *Times*' critic at the first performance: 'what one particularly admires is the naturalness of the dialogue' and 'the expertise of its timing'.<sup>36</sup>

The irascible, tyrannical character of Grandmamma looms over proceedings, even when she is off-stage, thanks to a recurring, halting, heavily accented motif associated with her character, first heard in the opening bars. Hence, although she only appears in person at the start of scene one and reappears at the climax of scene two, her malign musical presence is felt throughout the drama.

A. F. Leighton Thomas observed of the opera that, 'hidden beneath the omnipresent trappings of comedy – sometimes of a macabre kind – the composer sees, in *En famille*, a current of seriousness and of compassion for the shortcomings of our human race'.<sup>37</sup> It is true to say that the main characters of Papa and Mamma, though obviously flawed, are, nevertheless, not one-dimensional or entirely devoid of feeling.

Papa is good-hearted, but ineffectual and as painfully unassuming as his opening line suggests, 'Yes, it's me, only me'. However, Grace Williams brings out his humanity, when, after his mother has been pronounced dead, he reminds the family that she was not always monstrous: 'I cannot help remembering her as she was when I was a boy; a fine figure of a woman, stately, but not severe'. His grief at his mother's supposed death is not feigned, but rather, as he maintains, 'natural and sincere'.

<sup>34</sup> Grace Williams, 'The Parlour' radio script in 'A Self Portrait', *Welsh Music*, Vol.8, No.5, p.9.

<sup>35</sup> Malcolm Boyd, *Grace Williams* (University of Wales Press, 1980), p.53.

<sup>36</sup> 'Naturalness of new Welsh opera', *The Times*, 6 May 1966, p.18.

<sup>37</sup> A. F. Leighton Thomas (1965), 'The Music of Grace Williams', *The Anglo-Welsh Review*, Vol. 15, p.99.

The audience is also invited to feel sympathy for Mamma, a woman who has slaved for her mother-in-law ‘for ten long years’. It is thanks to her spirit and initiative that the family has survived at all. Papa’s job doesn’t pay well, but his wife is ‘thrifty, so they manage’.<sup>38</sup> As the curtain falls, she seems destined for an unfulfilled life of hard work and unhappiness, ‘There’s nothing more to say, there’s only desolation!’.

Marked ‘con tristezza e tenerezza’ (with sadness and tenderness), the wistfully lyrical *Andante* duet, ‘There is no justice’, as Mamma and Papa are left on the stage together near the very end of the opera to face up to the future, was composed as an afterthought and has nothing to do with Maupassant. Yet the composer had ‘no regrets’<sup>39</sup> about this late addition and, in a letter to Elizabeth Maconchy, dated 6 June 1966, she described the final duet as ‘the best thing [in the opera], musically’.<sup>40</sup>

The two grandchildren in Maupassant’s original story are a boy and a girl, who fall asleep after dinner. Grace Williams decided to have two girls in her adaptation and to invent more for them to do. In the composer’s words, ‘Gradually, without my realizing it, they ceased to belong to Maupassant; beneath a mask of innocence, they became *enfants terribles*, children of the stage, not of the short story’.<sup>41</sup> The girls sing together and move together ‘in symmetrical, stylised fashion’, as Daniel Jones noted.<sup>42</sup> Elizabeth Maconchy was very taken with the granddaughters, describing them as ‘genuinely alive characters’.<sup>43</sup>

The chorus are given several hearty tunes and become the focus of attention during the interlude as they run onstage, sing excitedly in front of the curtain, ‘Have you heard the news?’ and, in due course, run off again. Their condolences to the grieving son and daughter in the opera’s second scene, though false (‘How sad it is ... Alas, good neighbours, we are so very grieved’), are set to music that is headed ‘Elegy’ in the score, marked ‘piangevole’ (plaintive) and contains no trace of irony. The composer allows

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<sup>38</sup> Grace Williams’s introduction to the opera, as broadcast on BBC Radio 3 on 26 October, 1969.

<sup>39</sup> Grace Williams, ‘Short story-cum-opera’, *Western Mail* (unattributed), (undated), held in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

<sup>40</sup> *Music, Life and Changing Times*, Vol.2., p.246.

<sup>41</sup> ‘Short story-cum-opera’.

<sup>42</sup> Daniel Jones, handwritten notes for a talk on *The Parlour*, p.11, held in the Daniel Jones Archive (undated), National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

<sup>43</sup> *Music, Life and Changing Times*, Vol.1, p.208.

the audience to discern for themselves the hollowness of the neighbours' commiserations, rather than choosing to underline the point with mock pathos.

The score features several attractive instrumental solos, such as the delicate trumpet line as Papa and Mamma come slowly downstairs in shock after having seen Grandmamma's 'body'. Among notable examples of chamber textures is the plangent episode for clarinets and bassoon as the 'shady' Dr Charlton suggests cognac to cheer everyone up. There is little room for extended orchestral passages in such a concise, tautly written score, yet, for those brief passages where the whole orchestra is given its head, the composer's skill in handling large-scale forces is apparent. When, in a letter to conductor and composer Arwel Hughes,<sup>44</sup> Grace Williams discussed shortening the opera for the purposes of a projected television staging, she suggested omitting, among other passages, the interlude, a piece with significant orchestral contributions, yet, as she pointed out, 'it would cut out some of the best music'.<sup>45</sup>

At its first performance, *The Parlour* was given a sustained ovation by an enthusiastic audience and there were some very good press notices. Reviewing the work for the *Western Mail*, Alun Hoddinott noted that, 'there can be no doubt that Miss Williams has brilliantly solved the technical problems of opera, and this in a first opera is no mean achievement'.<sup>46</sup> Writing in *The Sunday Times*, Felix Aprahamian was profuse in his admiration, describing *The Parlour* as 'hilarious' and 'an undoubted hit', going on to remark that 'the piece progresses with perfect clarity and a fine sense of musical contrast'. He concluded his observations by commenting that 'Miss Williams shows a remarkable feeling for musical proportion in her very first operatic essay'.<sup>47</sup> An anonymous review in *The Stage and Television Today* remarked that 'the music is throughout tuneful, full of distinctive texture, rich and vital'.<sup>48</sup>

Following the opera's premiere on 5 May 1966, The WNO gave several further performances that season in Cardiff, as well as one in North Wales, but it was dropped from the company's schedule in 1967. *The Parlour* was revived by the semi-professional

<sup>44</sup> Head of Music in Wales from 1965 to 1971.

<sup>45</sup> Letter from Grace Williams to Arwel Hughes, 7 August 1967, held in the National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth.

<sup>46</sup> Alun Hoddinott, *Western Mail*, 7 May 1966.

<sup>47</sup> Felix Aprahamian, 'After Maupassant', *The Sunday Times*, 8 May 1966, p.28.

<sup>48</sup> 'Welsh Opera Premiere', *The Stage and Television Today*, 12 May 1966, p.15.

Abbey Opera Group at the Mary Abbot's Theatre, Kensington for four performances in April 1974, when it shared an evening with Darius Milhaud's *Trois opéras minutes*. According to a review of this staging, the orchestral parts were reduced to piano, harp and percussion. Commenting on the opera's London debut on 3 April 1974, the critic in *The Stage and Television Today* wrote that 'the music often provided a witty accompaniment to the text'.<sup>49</sup>

*The Parlour* was staged again in Autumn 1993 by the Welsh College of Music and Drama at the Sherman Theatre, Cardiff, paired with Puccini's *Il Tabarro*. Reviewing this production, Jon Holliday described Grace Williams's opera as 'tuneful and entertaining' and 'macabre fare, but charming and lightened by many touches of humour'.<sup>50</sup>

After the 1966 production of *The Parlour*, the BBC commissioned a television opera from Grace Williams, which was to be produced by Cedric Messina. The composer was very keen to adapt another Maupassant story, *Boule de Suif*. As she put it, 'Maupassant's stories really do read like film scenarios – one sees every detail – half the work's done before one begins'.<sup>51</sup> However, the BBC production team were not sympathetic to the idea. Balzac's *El Verdugo*, Vercors's *Le silence de la mer*, and a fantasy by Marcel Aymé were also considered, but, sadly, the project was eventually shelved. Consequently, *The Parlour*, which Malcolm Boyd declared to be 'without doubt one of Grace Williams's best works',<sup>52</sup> remains her only large-scale dramatic work for the stage.

Paul Conway, 2025

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<sup>49</sup> D. F. B., 'Abbey Opera – The Parlour', *The Stage and Television Today*, 11 April 1974, p.20.

<sup>50</sup> Jon Holliday, 'Cardiff – The Parlour/Il Tabarro', *The Stage and Television Today*, 2 September 1993, p.20.

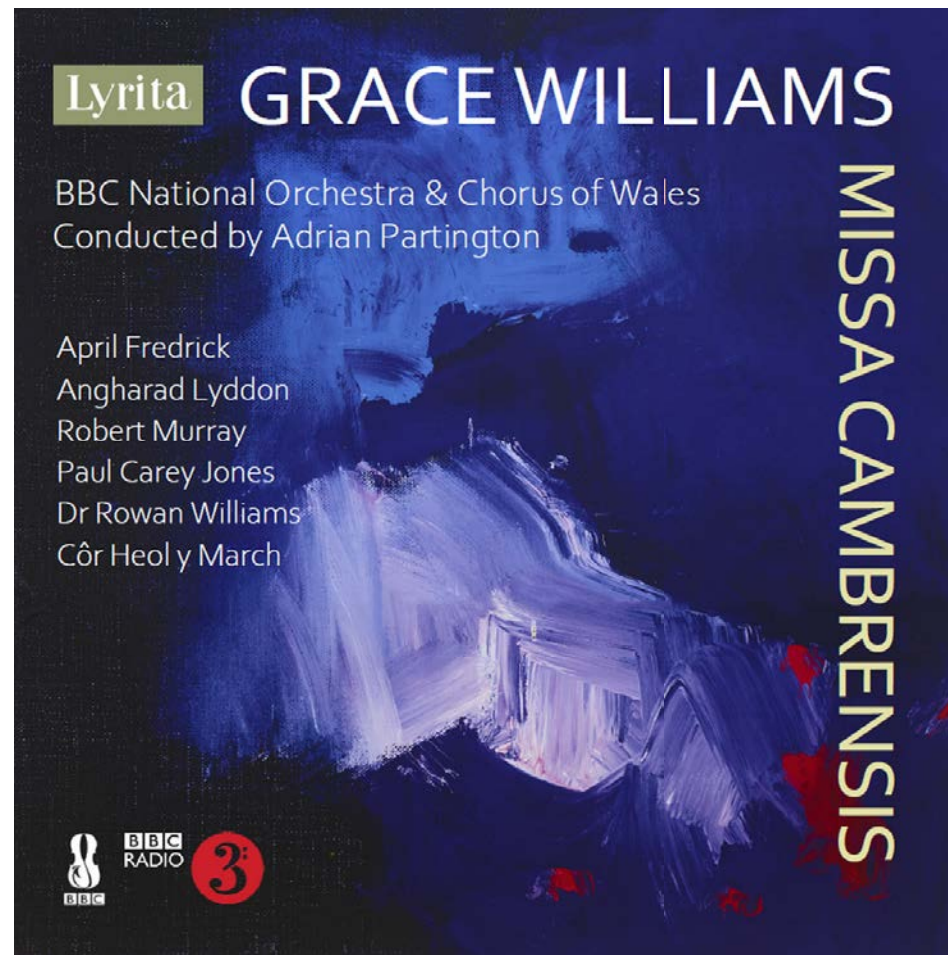
<sup>51</sup> *Music, Life and Changing Times*, Vol.2., p.252.

<sup>52</sup> *Grace Williams*, p.55.





Grace Williams : a studio portrait from the 1970s



‘A number of works by Grace Williams have appeared on CD in recent years, with Lyrita leading the way, as they so often do with British music. However, there’s been nothing on the scale of this first commercial recording of her *Missa Cambrensis*. This Latin setting of the Ordinary of the Mass was composed between 1968 and 1970; it was one of her last works and I think it’s legitimate to consider it as her magnum opus ... It must be highly unlikely that *Missa Cambrensis* will ever receive a second recording so it’s as well that this premiere recording – which both composer and work thoroughly deserve – is such an excellent one. I urge you to investigate this compelling and profound work through this very fine recording’. *John Quinn musicwebinternational.com*