

## WILLIAMS, GRACE MARY (1906-1977), composer

**Name:** Grace Mary Williams  
**Date of birth:** 1906  
**Date of death:** 1977  
**Gender:** Female  
**Occupation:** composer  
**Area of activity:** Music  
**Author:** Rhidian Griffiths

Grace Williams was born in Barry, Glamorgan on 19 February 1906, the eldest of three children of William Matthews Williams (a schoolteacher from Wrexham) and his wife Rose Emily (née Richards), a teacher from Llanelli, who had married in 1900. Her brother Glyn was born in 1908, and her sister Marian in 1919. W. M. Williams was an accomplished musician and the conductor of the Romilly Boys' Choir, which achieved considerable fame.

Grace was educated at Barry Girls' Grammar School and was much influenced by her music teacher Rhyda Jones, who had recently graduated from UCW Aberystwyth where she had been taught by **Walford Davies**. Her pupil proceeded to the University College in Cardiff where she studied music under **David Evans** and took her B.Mus. in 1926. She recalled that the course in Cardiff was rather mechanical, with endless exercises which gave little opportunity to her instinct for composition. But she was encouraged to go on to the Royal College of Music in London to study composition with Ralph Vaughan Williams and Gordon Jacob, and from there went in 1930 to Vienna to study with Egon Wellesz.

She taught at Camden Girls' School in London and at the Southlands College of Education, and during this period became a close friend of the composer Benjamin Britten, who gave her assistance and encouraged her to develop her gift for composition, though she declined an invitation to become his assistant. After her return to south Wales in 1947 she earned her living by teaching, composing and writing radio programmes. She wrote music for several films, the first of which was *Blue Scar* (1949), directed by Jill Craigie. She also composed incidental music for radio performances of plays by **Saunders Lewis**.

She received a number of commissions from the BBC, the National Eisteddfod, and music festivals, and some of her works, such as her Trumpet Concerto, are among the best of their time. Her style was lyrical, and she favoured symphonic and vocal music over chamber music. She acknowledged the influence of strict metre poetry, as in her *Penillion* for orchestra which she composed in 1955 for the National Youth Orchestra of Wales. One of her best known works is the *Fantasia on Welsh Nursery Tunes* (1938). She also wrote *Missa Cambrensis*, *Sea Sketches*, two symphonies and a violin concerto. Her one-act opera *The Parlour* (1966), based on her own adaptation of a story by Guy de Maupassant, shows considerable gifts of staging.

Grace Williams was a quiet and unassuming person, highly regarded by her fellow composers for her intelligence and the quality of her judgement. She struggled hard to live as a professional composer at a time when women composers were not given due respect. She was also highly self-critical, and destroyed many of her early manuscripts and everything that she thought unfit to survive.

She died in Barry on 10 February 1977. Her manuscripts are preserved in the National Library of Wales, and the centenary of her birth in 2006 saw a number of performances of her works.

### Author

Rhidian Griffiths

### Sources

Malcolm Boyd, *Grace Williams* (Cardiff 1980)

Rhiannon Mathias, *Lutyens, Maconchy, Williams and Twentieth-Century British Music: a blest trio of sirens* (Farnham 2012)

*Welsh Music*, 5/6 (1977); 5/7 (1977); 8/5 (1987)

### Further Reading

Grace Williams (1906-77), Discover Welsh Music website, viewed 7 March 2018

Beryl H. Griffiths, *Mamwlad* (Gwasg Carreg Gwalch Llanrwst 2016), pp. 182-202

Erica Jeal *Grace Williams: Chamber Works review – don't take this neglected Welsh composer at her word*; *The Guardian*, 7 March 2019

Mansel Thomas, *Cyfansoddyr Ieuaic Cyfoes, Tir newydd*, rhif 7, Chwefror 1937, pp.3-6

Wikipedia Article: [Grace Williams](#)

### Images

Ceri Thomas, *Grace Williams (1906-1977)*

### Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Grace Williams Music Manuscripts](#)

VIAF: [176320](#)

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**Published date:** 2014-06-10

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APA Citation



Griffiths, R., (2014). WILLIAMS, GRACE MARY (1906-1977), composer. *Dictionary of Welsh Biography*. Retrieved 9 Nov 2024, from <https://biography.wales/article/s10-WILL-MAR-1906>

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