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The Musical Sisters

Last updated: 09 June 2008

As Gregynog prepares to celebrate 75 years of its annual festival in July 2008, Dr Rhian Davies evokes the unique musical history of the Davies sisters which continues to inspire in Mid Wales and beyond:



"Industry to Impressionism, last year's popular exhibition at National Museum Wales, drew attention to Gwendoline and Margaret Davies as pioneering collectors of contemporary French and British art.

This year, the focus shifts to Gregynog, their magnificent former home five miles north of Newtown, and ten days of programming to celebrate 75 years since the sisters founded a Festival of Music and Poetry at the Hall in 1933.

Gwendoline and Margaret's early musical experience ranged from recording folksongs with a phonograph in rural Montgomeryshire to attending performances of Lohengrin and the Ring at Wagner's Festspielhaus in Bayreuth.



Each also worked to develop her own talents. Gwendoline played a Stradivarius violin known as the 'Parke' and her surviving sheet music, acquired as far afield as Paris and Dresden, is covered in fingering, bowing and other performance markings.

She passed the Intermediate level examination of the Incorporated Society of Musicians at Wrexham in 1897, although the official paperwork was careful to include the solemn disclaimer: 'This Certificate does not qualify the holder to practice as a Professional Musician'.

That said, the programme of a recital given under the auspices of the University College of Wales Musical Club at Aberystwyth in 1911 proves that she was capable of a public performance of the César Franck Sonata. And Margaret, although generally regarded as a painter and wood engraver, took formal singing lessons and is believed to have studied the harp with Gwendolen Mason.

By the time the sisters purchased Gregynog from their brother David in 1920, they had become increasingly involved in the patronage of music as well as art.

Under conditions of great secrecy - and rampant press speculation - in 1914, Gwendoline had agreed to provide £3,000 per annum to establish a School of Music for Wales at Aberystwyth which would offer high-level instrumental tuition alongside a programme of outreach through chamber concerts.

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The scheme foundered not only because of the First World War but also when news that members of the French-based Gaston Le Feuve Quartet were to form the backbone of Faculty staff provoked the enraged local response: 'Could there not be found one English or Welsh ewe-lamb capable of teaching Welsh lambs how to baa?'

In 1919, however, came a fresh opportunity for musical missionary work through the creation and endowment of two simultaneous positions for Henry Walford Davies as first Gregynog Professor of Music at Aberystwyth and first Director of the National Council of Music for Wales.

Once Walford Davies began bringing his Aberystwyth students on retreat to Gregynog and arranged that the annual conferences of the National Council of Music should take place at the Hall, the sisters decided to transform the existing billiard room into a dedicated space for music-making.

The elaborate central fireplace gave way to a three-manual organ, installed by the noted maker Frederick ('Daddy') Rothwell to Walford Davies' personal specifications.



Gwendoline Davies enjoyed playing the Gregynog organ for relaxation and would accompany Dora Herbert Jones in performances of He shall feed his flock from Handel's Messiah.

Dora, the well-known traditional singer and broadcaster, had been friendly with the Davieses for several years before accepting an appointment as personal secretary to Gwendoline in 1927. A vivid entry by Ernest Rhys in the Gregynog Visitors' Book recalls her at the heart of 'a joyous jimboree' of impromptu folksinging in the Front Hall.

The sisters and Dora were members of the Gregynog Choir, an ensemble of estate workers and other local people which first sang at the Hall in 1929. Following a performance of Vaughan Williams' *Benedicite*, directed by the composer himself, in 1932, the Choir went on to become the backbone of the original Gregynog Festivals, 1933-38.

Fellow artists included Adrian Boult, Jelly d'Arányi, Leila Mégane and Elsie Suddaby. Members of the Choir also appeared at Royal Command Concerts in the Albert Hall in 1935 and 1938, and made several broadcasts, notably a live relay of Bach's *St Matthew Passion* from Gregynog's Music Room at Easter 1939.

Following the Second World War and the death of Gwendoline Davies in 1951, a second sequence of Festivals, 1956-61, was directed by Ian Parrott, one of Walford Davies' successors as Gregynog Professor of Music at Aberystwyth.

Helen Watts, Redvers Llewellyn and Evelyn Barbirolli were among the outstanding soloists whom he engaged. A one-off Festival in 1972 featured a recital by Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears and Osian Ellis before the third and present series of Festivals was revived by the tenor Anthony Rolfe Johnson in 1988.

Gregynog has continued to attract international artists such as John Lill, Benjamin Luxon and, most recently, Emma Johnson and The King's Singers, while creating opportunities for emerging musicians who have gone on to develop their own stellar careers including Guy Johnston, Frederick Kempf and Bryn Terfel.

Artistic planning for the 75th anniversary Festival has been driven by original research to identify a wealth of previously undocumented materials in public and private collections about Gregynog's rich musical life.

All events have been created especially to honour Gwendoline and Margaret Davies as patrons and practitioners of the arts and the programme offers an unique opportunity to enjoy a feast of music in the setting for which it was written.

Repertoire by composers known to have visited Gregynog and Montgomeryshire is the central theme and, to extend the practice of the past, new work has been commissioned from Hilary Tann and Menna Elfyn.

Leading commentators will create a context with presentations and pre-performance talks while specially-curated exhibitions, archive films and demonstrations at the world-famous in-house Press will all help bring the heritage of the Hall alive.

Joyce Grenfell described Gregynog as 'the big thing in my year' and Festival music-making as an 'unalloyed pleasure'. We welcome you to the same iconic and magical setting this midsummer to be a part of a very special house-party."

Article by Dr Rhian Davies

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