

Elizabeth Poston (1905-1987)

Nurtured in rural Hertfordshire, Elizabeth loved the English countryside – its wildlife, its peace and beauty, especially the views to the west of her home, Rooks Nest House, Stevenage, views equally beloved by her friend E. M. Forster who lived in the house as a boy and wrote about them in his novel *Howards End* (1910) – a book based upon the house and its inhabitants. Appropriately enough, when *Howards End* was televised by the BBC in 1970, it was Elizabeth who wrote the music for it.

In the copious writing that Elizabeth kept up all her life there are many references to the rhythms and sounds of the countryside; she had a perceptive ear even for the cawing of resident rooks holding their parliaments on her lawn, the swish of steel scything through surrounding grassy meadows; and the rhythmic variations and ‘pail pitch’ of hand milking from the farm nearby. She even claimed to have been able to hear earthworms moving through the soil, which to a country-lover who has disturbed worms at dawn would be natural enough. She relished too the lilt of the local country dialect; indeed, it was the music of words that guided Elizabeth in her choice of texts for her song arrangements. She was particularly concerned with maintaining a balance between words or solo line and accompaniment whether instrumental or vocal, as we can appreciate in the best known of her works, *Jesus Christ the Apple Tree*.

That she is not better known for her other (300) compositions, is largely attributable to most having been set aside in her attic, for she tended to lose interest once a work had been composed and performed – many commissioned and broadcast by the BBC – and, in any case, she developed distrust of music publishers after bad experiences with some in negotiating fair contracts and in receiving timely payment. Nevertheless, it is to be hoped that the recent trickle of newly published works prompted by the celebration in 2005 of the centenary of her birth will eventually swell into a discernable flow from the present copyright holder, Campion Press ¹.

Elizabeth came from a privileged background – good private schooling (shared with members of the Royal Family), including lessons in violin, viola and piano, travel abroad in Italy and France (she became fluent in French as well as German) and study at the Royal College of Music where she gained prizes in composition and was greatly influenced by Ralph Vaughan Williams, then Professor of Composition there. As she said, ‘for most of my life he was to me friend, mentor and father in place of the father I lost too early’. She also made a point of meeting and becoming the closest of friends with Peter Warlock (*alias* Philip Heseltine) with whom she shared a strong interest in 16th and early 17th century poetry and music. She felt that he had been badly misjudged by Cecil Gray and sought to put the record straight, particularly in a definitive series of broadcasts including one, *Dispelling the Jackalls* in 1964 ². His death in 1930 some six years after they had met was a considerable shock. Her health at the time was poor but it seems she recovered her zest for life during a holiday with her mother in the Far East in 1934, enthusing in copious correspondence about her impressions. Up to the outbreak of war in 1939 she made several visits to her diplomat brother in the Near East and continued her exploration of Europe. Looking back on this period she wrote ³. ‘I worked for the British Council in the Near East and in archaeological and other jobs [she broadcast from Jerusalem, for example], in amanuensis and scoring. Everything impressed me except such as I learned to reject. I was starting from scratch and it was like receiving the force of the whole ocean. As the music I heard ranged from the Vatican Choir and Opera in Paris, Bach in Germany, Mozart in Salzburg, Bedouin in the desert, to the folk music of Central Europe, it isn’t possible to specify. This cosmopolitan

artistic life was the air I breathed, a natural element. The fact that I had these chances was in itself an education. Through it, I learned to discriminate.’

Her powers of discrimination were soon to be tested when she joined the BBC under Arthur Bliss, becoming responsible for the selection, rehearsal, recording and broadcasting of music and music-related topics. In March 1945 the BBC forwarded a letter sent from an appreciative widow in France who has also lost her only son in the war, ‘So I will thank you for your beautiful progress. Polish, Tchechoslovaque, Ukraine music – and English, all so well selected. And lately the delightful Portuguese songs and melodies!! Sometimes it makes me weep, but it is good to weep. [...] And once more: all my thanks for the in[de]fatigable voice coming from London – London the heart of the world for five years!’⁴ Elizabeth’s huge workload was carried out under the most difficult of wartime conditions, including the bombing of BBC buildings, yet she still found time to perform at the piano. Furthermore, behind the scenes, she had had to keep in touch with resistance movements in Europe, regularly sending out crucial coded musical messages⁵. The details of this secret work she would never divulge, but it proved to be a considerable strain on her health since the slightest mistake could have been fatal for so many.

Elizabeth did not marry and, in her pocket diary of 1942 declared: ‘I had never made any vow against marriage but I had long, long been persuaded it was a state for me of too much hazard, too little promise to draw free from my individual place and purpose.’ Much of that purpose arose from her special love of poetry and folksong, particularly English folksong, though she collected and arranged material from all over the world⁶. Her Italian songs⁷, that stem from the time she was living in Italy, were embarked upon because she felt that they were less well known than those of Spain and she wanted to do for them what Maurice Ravel had done for the Greeks and Manuel de Falla had for the Spanish – ‘not to set the songs as they are sung unadorned, but to catch in the setting something of their atmosphere and background’.

Most of Elizabeth’s compositions are of choral works, together with solo songs, song arrangements, vocal collections and one crazy operetta (she had a wicked sense of humour). About a quarter comprises incidental orchestral music and pieces for various solo or chamber groups⁸. There are no symphonies or concertos, for Elizabeth liked small-scale, intimate, subtle composition.

It was during her wartime period at the BBC that Elizabeth became acquainted with a huge number of contacts, many becoming close friends, among whom was the pianist and composer, William Busch. He was very much on the same musical wavelength as Elizabeth who arranged for his work to be broadcast, corresponding with him frequently and at length over matters of mutual interest until his tragic premature death in January 1945. The letters provide the greatest insight into her thoughts in general about music, music-making and musicians, and in particular about William and his music⁹. They (like much of the rest of her voluminous correspondence) show Elizabeth to be a caring and true friend, engaging with a wide spectrum of society – her brother, gardeners, school-fellows, *au pairs* of varied nationality and their parents, aristocrats, animal-owners, children, infirm servants, amateur musicians, budding song-writers, up and coming soloists, beekeepers. wind-mill enthusiasts – the list goes on.

After the war Elizabeth took a well-deserved break in North America with her mother Clementine and there met and empathised with the Canadian composer, Jean Coulthard who became a long-standing close friend, often visiting her in England and travelling with her in Europe. They had much in common (as has been highlighted by Professor William Bruneau²) including their love of music and literature, and of France and the French. They shared a concern for the unenviable position of women composers in a man’s world together with an appreciation of the bizarre. The friendship, intense and intimate, provided mutual support and

also, for Elizabeth, living as she was in an England impoverished by the Second World War, considerable consolation and material benefit from Jean's Canadian generosity. The two seem to have been like exceedingly close sisters (and had once been taken as such), a relationship that was especially valuable to Elizabeth, a lone daughter, and both had a strong bond to Elizabeth's mother. In 1951 Elizabeth wrote *A Garland of Laurel – In Praise of Women* for flute, strings and tenor, commissioned by the Society of Women Composers (of which she later became President) in which she included, dedicated to Jean, *The Lullaby of a Lover* (George Gasgoine, 1575). Jean was the friend with whom she shared thoughts and feelings she would share with no one else^{2&3}.

Although Elizabeth had decided to be a freelance musician, working from home, she continued to be involved with the BBC. In 1946 she was asked through Douglas Cleverdon to spend a year to establish, with the help of an expert panel, a new BBC Third Programme of quality music and literature – what she called 'that splendidly idealistic phoenix that was to arise from the jaws of hell [...] We came to it, I and my contemporaries, as artists, amateurs of the medium: writers, painters, poets, designers, actors, musicians, an enormously divergent motley, humorously individual, united in one cause. As strange a company as ever came together. And yet it worked⁵.' The BBC also commissioned much of her output of music which reached a peak in the 1950s, subsequently engaging her as a special listener to report to its Music Advisory Panel on broadcast music. This latter task she carried out conscientiously from 1959 to 1974, filing perceptive and fair criticism of several hundred programmes and of thousands of performers.

Without salaried employment, however, her financial position was generally precarious, made more so by her determination to preserve Rooks Nest House for the nation. This would require not only its purchase, its expensive maintenance and its improvement but the accumulation of enough capital to endow it. A potential obstacle to her purpose loomed in 1946 with the beginning of the expansion of Stevenage into a New Town, which actually threatened to destroy both the house and the surrounding beloved countryside, a threat that remained a continual, debilitating worry throughout her life and was held in bay only through the ready help of E. M. Forster, by international support and eventually the establishment of a local group, The Friends of the Forster Country³.

She continued to cope with the problems of life at Rooks Nest House – those of the property, of her beloved mother's deteriorating health and eventual painful death, of the ailing health of a faithful servant and finally of her own health following a fall at the age of 81 in October 1986 that kept her in hospital for months with a broken shoulder and pelvis. Despite this accident she had continued to compose, as she explained at the beginning of the following March to her friend Gunnvor Stallybrass (whose deceased husband, Oliver had been responsible for editing the Abinger edition of *Howards End*): 'I have somehow managed to get my Choral Setting [for massed voices of the Women's Dacacentennial Day of Prayer] done for the Albert Hall do, now in rehearsal, & I am told, going well, and liked. I have called it *My Settled Rest*, a quotation from its words, a very beautiful 18C paraphrase of the *Twenty Third Psalm* which I have re-fashioned with harp on a lovely early tune. Perhaps it will reach Oliver'. Incidentally, Elizabeth loved the harp, making use of it in about half her compositions.

Elizabeth had also been working on a book of carols which was still only half finished but Malcolm Williamson (Master of the Queen's Music) who had met her a few years earlier readily and generously completed it, writing a comprehensive introductory essay and setting some thirty items, about half the total¹⁰.

Unfortunately, Elizabeth's story has not yet been told in full, nor has all her music yet been published, but those who have known her or have read what she has written or seen what little has been written about her and heard her music are left with a deep impression of a

truly remarkable person. She was someone of undoubted talent as a musician (composer, performer, critic and broadcaster), demanding the highest standards of herself (and of others); a meticulous scholar; impressive behind the microphone; a great raconteur, given to a little spicy exaggeration; always elegant whether in evening gown or draped in her French shepherd's woolly jacket over jeans; and, above all a person of great humanity, sympathetic to the interests and needs of others. Elizabeth received a belated Civil List Award, which carried a special pension, but she died before she could receive any benefit from it. Her own 'settled rest' had finally come on 18 March 1987. A small plaque, next to the monument to E. M. Forster in the graveyard of St. Nicholas Church, Stevenage where her parents are interred, commemorates the centenary of her birth.

End Notes:

1. The works are:

Fanfare for Hallé, for Brass Quintet (2005) written to celebrate the 70th birthday of her friend Sir John Barbirolli and formulated on the initials of himself, his wife, Evelyn Rothwell and the Hallé orchestra. She wrote, 'the piece isn't difficult: it requires on toes playing'!

Blackberry Fold – Requiem for a Dog, for String Orchestra and Flute (2005), dedicated to A. W. Friese-Greene and written after she had buried her pet dog under a blackberry thicket in her garden. She explained that 'The swaying 5/4 folk song figure, something in my system, was particularly and consciously there at the time – we had already been recording *The Nativity* and it was in my mind, so I let it be in the music, a private process of threads of thoughts over a spell of years';

Harlow Concertante, for String Orchestra and String Quartet (2005), marking the 21st anniversary of Harlow New Town, first performed with the Alborni String Quartet, 1969, London Première 2006;

The Hosanna for Choir and Organ (2009), dedicated to King Edward VI Grammar School, Southampton for the 300th anniversary of the birth of a former pupil, Isaac Watts in 1974;

Sei Canzoni (Six Songs) for Mezzo-soprano, Clarinet, and Piano (2009) using poems by Dante Gabriel Rossetti (1828-1882) in a sequence about love – expressing its hopes, its tribulations, its maternal feelings and, finally, its loss.

The English Daybook for Choir and Harp (2009) commissioned for the Farnham Festival in 1967 and given its first performance in Australia two years later it has been described by John Gardner as linking 'together a sequence of sacred and profane poems in which the small-scale happenings of the day are symbolically identified with the procession of the seasons of the year and, by further augmentation, with the span of life itself'.

2. *Elizabeth Poston: Post-Centenary 2005 Appreciation*. Ed., John S. Alabaster, The Friends of the Forster Country, 138 pp. (2007).

3. *Elizabeth Poston: Her Own Words*, Ed., John S. Alabaster, The Friends of the Forster Country, 91 pp. (2008).

4. The letter, dated 2 March 1945 from Madame S. R. Peyronnet of Bures-Sur-Yvette was found folded in Elizabeth's pocket diary of that year.

5. *Elizabeth Poston Centenary, 2005: Contributed Articles and Personal Letters*. Ed., John S. Alabaster, The Friends of the Forster Country, 129 pp. 2006,

6. See, for example, the scholarly *The Penguin Book of Christmas Carols* (1963), *The Penguin Book of American Folk Songs* (1965) with Alan Lomax, *The Second Penguin Book of Christmas Carols* (1970) and *The Faber Book of French Songs* (1972) with Paul Arma.

7. *Tuscan Songs* (1935) and *Sette Canzoni* (Seven Italian Folk Songs) for Soprano or Mezzo-soprano & piano (1945).

8. A list of Elizabeth Poston's published music is given in *Elizabeth Poston, Composer: Her Life at Rooks Nest* by Margaret Ashby, The Friends of the Forster Country, 40 pp. (2004) and also in *Beyond the Apple Tree: The Published Music of Elizabeth Poston (1905-1987)*, Doctorate Thesis by Jamie C. Bartlett, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 101 pp. (1996).
9. *Elizabeth Poston: Letters to William and Sheila Busch*. John S. Alabaster (Ed.) and Julia Busch, The Friends of the Forster Country, 144 pp. 2009.
10. *A Book of Christmas Carols* by Elizabeth Poston & Malcolm Williamson. Simon & Schuster, London, 1988.



Elizabeth Poston with the Harpist, David Watkins with whom she collaborated closely in the 1960s
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Elizabeth Poston's home, Rooks Nest House, Stevenage, Hertfordshire, England

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Elizabeth Poston as a young woman

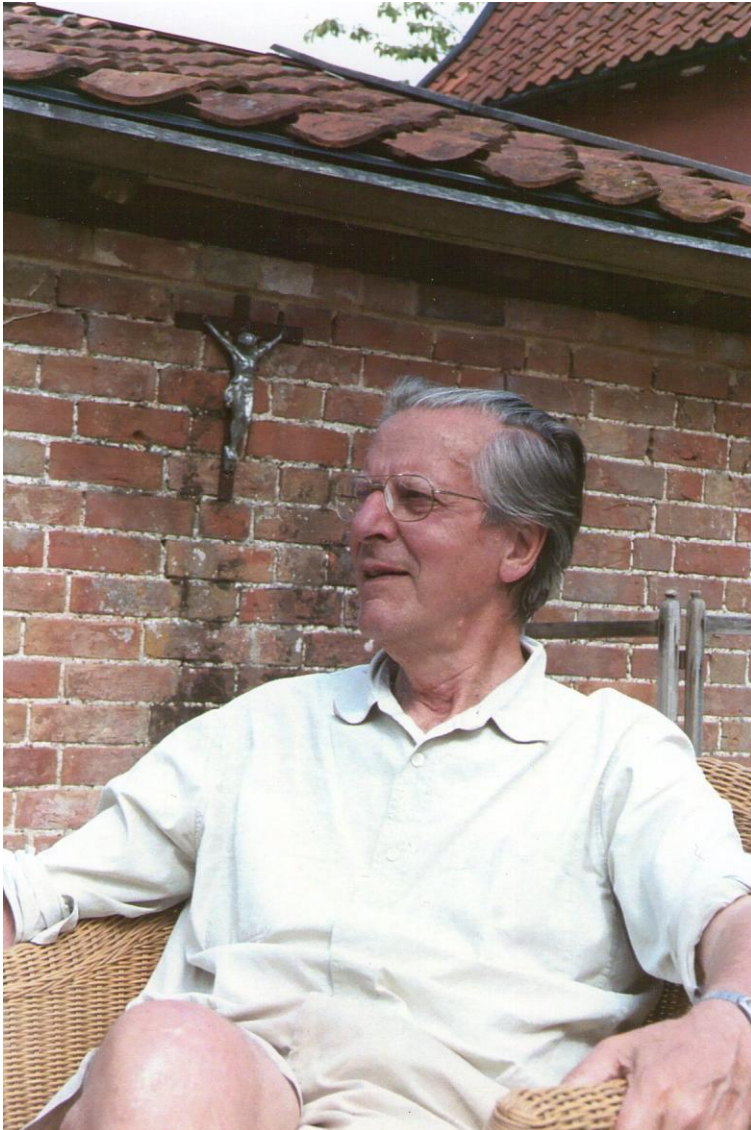


Elizabeth Poston wearing an French shepherd's old woollen jacket

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A retired environmental scientist, with several books and more than 100 papers to his name, John is an amateur musician (violin, viola, piano and recorder), and one-time beekeeper and woodworker. He has published a biography, *A Closer Look at William Alabaster (1568-1640) Poet, Theologian, and Spy?* and written articles on book-binding techniques, the *Promus* of Sir Francis Bacon and the English text of '*Don Quixote*'. He had the privilege of knowing Elizabeth Poston and some of her close friends and of being given access to her considerable archive of music and correspondence by her copyright holder and literary executor, Simon Campion.



Dr. John S. Alabaster at leisure in 2008