

FEMALE COMPOSERS - a music podcast with a pinch of history: Morfydd Owen (episode 4)

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MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Maida Vale* [excerpt]

Some biographies resemble a perfectly written score. Others end abruptly, mid-beat, leaving behind only silence and a multitude of questions. At the beginning of the twentieth century, British concert halls belonged to her. Young, immensely talented, and with a magnetic charisma, she composed masterpieces before she turned twenty. However, instead of a remarkable, global career, history has recorded only the abrupt, enigmatic end of her life. Why did such a powerful talent disappear from history's radar? In this episode, we will remove a layer of dust from forgotten archives to uncover traces of the fascinating life and, unfortunately, premature death of Morfydd Owen, the wonderful Welsh composer, the subject of today's meeting. Let me just remind you that this series is being produced thanks to a grant from the Minister of Culture and National Heritage, and we are already beginning our story!

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Four Welsh Impressions: Beti Bwt* [excerpt]

Morfydd Owen was born on October 1, 1891, at 72 Park Street in Treforest, Wales, the youngest of four children of William Owen, an accountant and textile shop owner; her mother was Sarah Jane Owen, née Jones. Morfydd's parents were talented amateur musicians - especially her mother, who played the piano and sang - which shaped the composer's artistic sensibilities from an early age. She also grew up alongside three older brothers: twins Richard Austin and William David (born August 1887) and Maldwyn Hugh (born January 1888).

Little Morfydd began playing the piano on her own at the age of four, and just two years later, she wrote her first composition, which unfortunately has not survived, and its title is unknown (incidentally, her first officially published work was a hymn titled simply "Morfydd," published in 1909, when she was 18). Recognizing their child's extraordinary musical potential, her parents took charge of her education. Initially, Morfydd was homeschooled by her mother, who then entrusted her daughter's musical education to local teacher Isabella Powell-Davies. At 16, Morfydd transferred to the class of Dr. David Evans at Cardiff University, where she initially studied privately in piano and composition. At 18, she was accepted to the university and officially joined his ranks.

When we talk about the composer's childhood and teenage years, it's important to note that Morfydd Owen grew up in a family home rich in traditional Welsh religious values, which played a big role in shaping her daily life and early musical training. The Owens were a deeply religious family, actively

participating in their local Presbyterian (Calvinist-Methodist) community. When Morfydd was a teenager, her dad played a key role in starting the Park Presbyterian Church in Treforest, and she even chose the organ for it herself. This strong bond with her faith and the religious music tradition really influenced her creativity, leading her to write many hymns and religious songs, including the well-known "*Gweddi y Pechadur*" ("*The Sinner's Prayer*"). Religion continued to be a big part of her identity even as she grew up and moved to London for her studies, which later created some serious tension in her marriage to the skeptical atheist Ernest Jones. I'll dive into all that shortly, but first, let's chat about Morfydd's further musical education.

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Gweddi y Pechadur* [excerpt]

The London period (1912–1918) was the most intense, successful, and at the same time, the most tragic chapter in Morfydd Owen's life. Moving to the heart of the British Empire paved the way for a remarkable career, but it also drew her into some pretty complicated personal relationships. In September 1912, thanks to the Goring Thomas Scholarship that she held for four years, Morfydd kicked off her studies at the esteemed Royal Academy of Music in London. She focused on composition under the well-known Frederick Corder, while also studying voice and piano.

Her talent created quite a buzz. By the end of her first year at university, she had already got nearly all of the school's top awards, including the Charles Lucas Silver Medal for her impressive orchestral piece, *Nocturne in D ♭ major*, which was celebrated as one of the most unique student works in the academy's history (performed at the famous Queen's Hall in 1913). She also earned the Oliveria Prescott Prize, recognizing her overall academic excellence and outstanding performance. In the following years, she racked up more medals and honors, composing songs, sonatas, and chamber pieces that were frequently showcased in concerts. In January 1917, she performed as a mezzo-soprano at the Aeolian Hall, and by early 1918, her achievements were solidified with her appointment as an associate professor at her alma mater. In just ten years of composing, and at such a young age, she left behind around 250 scores.

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Four Welsh Impressions: Glantaf* [excerpt]

In the capital, Morfydd Owen led a captivating yet contrasting life, splitting her time between two completely different circles: the conservative and religious community linked to the Welsh diaspora around the Presbyterian chapel on Charing Cross Road. Here, she found comfort, a sense of national pride, and traditional support. The other circle was the bohemian scene in London. Morfydd shone as one of the most dazzling and flamboyant figures among the local intellectual elite. She stood out with her stunning beauty, magnetic charm, and daring fashion—sometimes opting for lampshades instead of hats. She mingled with notable personalities like writer D.H. Lawrence, American poet Ezra Pound, and MP Eliot Crawshay-Williams, who was Winston Churchill's secretary. In this lively atmosphere, she was seen as the life of the party and a free-spirited artist, which was a stark contrast to the modest, religious image she tried to project to her fellow countrymen as a simple girl from the Welsh countryside.

While Morfydd was becoming well-known in the capital, her family back in Wales was dealing with the chaos of the First World War and personal losses. Her father, William Owen, took pride in her achievements from a distance, always backing her up and making sure she visited her hometown of Treforest regularly. But the real heartache for the family hit in early 1918. Her twin brothers were

called up and sent to the front lines in war-torn France. With the heavy burden of worrying about their sons' safety, and for reasons still unclear, Morfydd's mother, Sarah Jane Owen, passed away on April 6, 1918, the very day she retired. Her unexpected death left the young artist shattered and cast a long shadow of grief over the Owen family home, forever taking away the sense of security that Treforest had once provided for Morfydd.

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Four Welsh Impressions: Llanbrynmair* [excerpt]

Let's take a moment to go back to London at the end of 1916, where Morfydd crossed paths with Dr. Ernest Jones, who was twelve years older than her. He was a well-respected neurologist, and the closest collaborator of Sigmund Freud. They first met at a New Year's Eve party as 1916 turned into 1917. Captivated by his seemingly modern outlook on life, she married him after just a few meetings, on February 6, 1917. However, being married to the controlling scientist quickly turned into an emotional trap for her. Jones, a firm atheist, looked down on her religious beliefs. He strictly prohibited her from performing on stage, forcing the young composer to give up her career to manage the household and act as his private secretary and proofreader for medical texts. This shift was even said to show in her appearance – the once cheerful girl with feathered hats started wearing only white and seemed to fade away. The tragic conclusion came during their holiday in Oystermouth, Wales, in August 1918. Morfydd suddenly became ill with acute appendicitis and a high fever. Instead of rushing her to a hospital in nearby Swansea, Ernest Jones opted to perform surgery right there. A local surgeon carried out the procedure on the kitchen table in Jones's family home. Due to complications, whether from improper cleaning of the infection or poisoning from the chloroform used for anesthesia, Morfydd Owen passed away on September 7, 1918, at just 26 years old. She was laid to rest in Wales, and her husband had a mysterious, ambiguous quote from Goethe's Faust inscribed on her gravestone in German: "Here the unspeakable is accomplished."

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Four Welsh Impressions: Glantaf* [excerpt]

The news of Morfydd Owen's sudden passing hit her family and the Welsh community hard, leaving them with a deep sense of injustice and suspicion towards her husband. Just five months before, Morfydd's father, William Owen, had laid his wife to rest, and now he was mourning the loss of a brilliant daughter who had brought pride to the whole region. To make matters worse, Morfydd's brothers were off fighting on the front lines in France at that time. Family and friends from the Welsh Presbyterian Chapel were taken aback by how the operation was handled – they couldn't understand and accept why it took place on a kitchen table at home when there was a modern hospital just a short distance away in Swansea. To add to the turmoil, Morfydd was buried quickly without an official death certificate (those documents weren't finalized until two weeks after the funeral), and her husband refused to allow an autopsy. For the deeply religious Owen family, the demeanor of the self-proclaimed atheist Ernest Jones, his coldness, and the mysterious quote from Faust on the tombstone felt like a painful and baffling insult.

After the loss of his wife, Ernest Jones made his way back to London and threw himself into his academic work, becoming a significant figure in the history of global psychiatry. In 1919, just a year after Morfydd passed away, he established the British Psychoanalytical Society, which he led for more than thirty years. Not long after, he remarried and had four children. Jones played a crucial role in the late 1930s when he personally helped Sigmund Freud and his family escape the Nazis in Vienna,

arranging for their safe passage and asylum in London. Up until his death in 1958, he was well-known internationally as Freud's official biographer, with multiple volumes to his name. However, back in Wales, where he and Morfydd were from, his reputation was forever overshadowed by the burden of responsibility for the young composer's untimely death.

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Four Welsh Impressions: Nant-y-ffrith* [excerpt]

The effort to keep Morfydd Owen's musical legacy alive has been a team effort between her family and some well-known national institutions, pulling her works back from the brink of being forgotten. Interestingly, it was Ernest Jones, feeling a lot of guilt, who first took the initiative to organize his wife's scattered manuscripts and even funded a four-volume Memorial Edition of her collected works back in 1923–24. While this personal effort helped save the scores from being lost forever, Cardiff University has been crucial in preserving her legacy, gathering over 180 surviving scores, private letters, and press clippings in its special collections. Still, it wasn't until the early 21st century that the composer's work really started to see a revival, thanks to Welsh musicologist Rhian Davies. Her extensive biographical research kicked off the global recognition of the centenary of the artist's death in 2018. Nowadays, organizations like *Oriana Publications* and the Welsh music center *Tŷ Cerdd* (House of Music) are carrying on the mission of sharing her music worldwide, regularly releasing professional recordings that bring Morfydd's songs and piano miniatures back to the modern concert scene.

A key player in bringing Morfydd Owen back into the spotlight is the Welsh musicologist, Dr. Rhian Davies, who has spent over 35 years diving into the artist's life and work. She kicked off her research in the 1980s, back when the composer was just a hazy legend in Wales, known as a "beautiful and tragically deceased girl." Dr. Davies spent considerable time searching through private attics, family archives belonging to Ernest Jones' descendants, and dusty old wardrobes in Welsh chapels, uncovering letters, diaries, and musical manuscripts that had been hidden away. Her groundbreaking biography completely shifted the way people think about British music history and showed that Owen was so much more than just a talented student. It was Dr. Davies's passion, along with her efforts to organize the global commemoration of the centenary of the composer's death (#MorfyddOwen100) in 2018, that motivated contemporary musicians worldwide to bring these works back into their regular performances.

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Four Welsh Impressions: Beti Bwt* [excerpt]

You know, when we talk about repertoire, we can't skip over the musical corner in today's episode. We're diving into the *Four Welsh Impressions*, a set of piano miniatures that Morfydd Owen composed between 1914 and 1915. This work really showcases her style and is one of her most personal solo pieces. She created it while studying at the Royal Academy of Music, and it beautifully blends late-Romantic techniques with the fresh vibes of French Impressionism, all while reflecting her deep connection to her Welsh roots. Each piece in this collection acts like a musical snapshot, capturing specific places in Wales that meant a lot to her, along with her bonds with close friends. So, let's explore what each piece has to offer!

Llanbrynmair (*Prelude in F sharp minor or Waiting for Eirlys*).

The first movement in the cycle has this really intriguing, three-part interpretive identity, which you can find in the notes in the margins of the autograph. The geographical title points to Llanbrynmair - a charming, hilly village in mid-Wales, where the composer's father was born and a place their family often visited for vacations. The music beautifully captures the grandeur and starkness of the local scenery with rich textures and a nostalgic melody in F-sharp minor. The subtitle, "Waiting for Eirlys," is a nod to her friend from the academy, Eirlys Roberts, who was known for always being late. From a musicological perspective, the piece strikes a balance between an impressionistic feeling of suspended time and a rising emotional tension that reflects the experience of waiting. In many ways, this little piece resonates with the Chopin tradition of romantic preludes, blending technical skill with deep sadness.

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Four Welsh Impressions: Llanbrynmair*

Glantaf (primarily Eglwys Glantaf / Glyntaff Church)

The second impression went through a noticeable title change during its creation. Some crossed-out notes in the manuscript show that Morfydd's initial inspiration came from the historic Glyntaff Church, which is close to her hometown of Treforest. The music itself has a deeply spiritual vibe, reflecting the Welsh tradition of worship and liturgical singing that shaped the composer's upbringing. Owen uses broad, chordal sounds that mimic the gentle tolling of church bells, the grand texture of an organ, or maybe even a polyphonic church choir. The static harmony and modal melodic shifts create a serene, sacred space that beautifully captures the essence of the Welsh countryside. However, the title change hints that the piece is more about musically depicting the view of the River Taff and the surrounding area from the composer's childhood home in Treforest. When translated, "*Glantaf*" means "*Bank of the River Taff*". The name is made up of two parts: *Glan*, which translates to "*bank*" (of a river or lake) or "*coast*" in Welsh, and *Taf* (*Taff*), the name of the main river that flows through South Wales, including Cardiff and Treforest, where the composer grew up. I encourage you to listen to the piece and embark on a musical journey to the stunning landscapes of Wales.

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Four Welsh Impressions: Glantaf*

Nant-y-ffrith

The third miniature takes us to the beautiful Wrexham countryside, specifically to the wooded valley of Nant-y-ffrith, known for its lovely streams, rivers, and waterfalls. This area is close to the home of one of Owen's dear friends, Mina Williams. The piece captures intense and dramatic contrasts that reflect the essence of flowing water - ranging from gentle, babbling brooks to powerful cascades. A closer look at the music reveals some wonderfully fluid patterns in the right-hand part, echoing Claude Debussy's Impressionist style (like in "*Reflets dans l'eau*" = *reflections in water*). Meanwhile, the shifting narrative - where moments of passion suddenly give way to silence - has been seen by scholars as a musical snapshot of a vibrant, intimate chat between Morfydd and Mina during their walks together. So, let's join them on this musical journey through the stunning valley of Nant-y-ffrith!

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Four Welsh Impressions: Nant-y-ffrith*

Beti Bwt

The final, fourth part of the cycle takes a big turn from the earlier ones in terms of mood and vibe. "*Beti Bwt*" is a delightful, lighthearted, and funny character sketch, focused on a particular person from a group of friends or a childhood buddy. Rather than the sad descriptions of nature, Owen highlights a lively rhythm, a lightness in expression (with a playful staccato), and a whimsical, unpredictable melody. The piece brings to mind traditional Welsh folk dances, but with a twist of modern 20th-century harmonics. This brilliant, upbeat ending showcases the composer's other side – a social butterfly full of humor and energy.

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Four Welsh Impressions: Beti Bwt*

Maida Vale

The piano piece *Maida Vale*, created in 1912, stands out as one of Morfydd Owen's most fascinating, original, and mysterious works. It was composed right when she was relocating from Wales to the heart of the British Empire, capturing her musical reaction to the vibrant city life she experienced as a young artist.

Unlike the later *Four Welsh Impressions* that showcased the rough Welsh landscape, this poem focuses on the lively and upscale London area of Maida Vale. It was in this neighborhood, with its impressive Victorian townhouses, charming waterways (Little Venice), and a diverse vibe, that Owen took her first steps in the city, which is evident in the distinct character of the work.

This piece really changes how we see Owen as a composer who's just tied to the late Romantic era. Modern musicians and music experts, like pianist Brian Ellsbury, have noticed that *Maida Vale* has a lot in common with the captivating, minimalist, and quirky style of Erik Satie, who is known for his famous *Gymnopédies*.

The music in this piece creates a one-of-a-kind feeling of suspended time, featuring repetitive bass lines and gentle, yet surprising, flowing melodies that could represent the water channels in the area. The usual harmonic structure found in British music schools takes a backseat to explorations of modality and chromaticism, which makes this work one of the composer's most innovative early piano pieces.

This piece beautifully captures the moment when a humble girl from the Welsh countryside transformed into an independent, brave artist, captivated by the European avant-garde, eager to take on the London salons. And honestly, I believe that's how we should remember her today, at this peak and happiest time in her life.

Catch you in the next podcast! See you soon!

MUZYKA: *Morfydd Owen - Maida Vale*

Archives and catalogs of digital manuscripts

- Cardiff University Special Collections: This institution holds the most comprehensive core collection of the composer's music. It provides an online digital catalogue, Papers of Morfydd Llwyn Owen, which includes over 180 compositions (orchestral, choral, chamber, and operatic works), as well as personal memorabilia such as concert programs and her marriage certificate to Ernest Jones. Some scanned sheet music is being published successively in the Digital Special Collections section.
- Archives Hub (Cardiff Collection): A UK-wide archival platform offering a detailed, structured inventory of the contents of Morfydd Owen's portfolios and manuscripts held in Cardiff, including Memorial Editions.
- National Library of Wales (Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru): The National Library of Wales provides archival descriptions of three major collections related to the artist:

a). *The Kitty Idwal Jones Collection* – containing, among other things, notes from the diaries of Morfydd Owen from 1914–1917, correspondence, and photocopies of folk songs.

b). *Eliot Crawshay-Williams Papers* – letters and correspondence.

c). *NLW MS 18247D* – biographical typescript and materials documenting her musical life.

- The National Archives: The UK National Archives maintains a consolidated reference list of archival units assigned to Morfydd Owen, facilitating the location of physical and digital documents in UK databases.

Biographies and historical portraits

- Dictionary of Welsh Biography: The official, free biography prepared by the National Library of Wales, offering an accurate historical overview of her education at Cardiff University and the Royal Academy of Music, her career in London and her tragic death.
- Illuminate Women's Music: "An incalculable loss": Morfydd Owen (1891-1918) is a biographical article by Dr. Rhian Davies, a leading scholar of the Owen legacy. The text includes unique archival photographs from private collections.
- Oxford Music Online / Grove Music: An encyclopedic academic entry summarizing Owen's work, along with a full bibliography of relevant literature (access via library subscriptions, among other things).
- Welsh Music History na Taylor & Francis: A scholarly chapter in PDF format describing her contribution to collecting Welsh musical folklore in collaboration with Ruth Herbert Lewis.

Commercial sheet music and scientific databases

- Oriana Publications: A music publishing house with a permanent online catalog of scores and sound excerpts of Owen's vocal and piano works (e.g. Gweddi y Pechadur, Slumber Song of the Madonna and Four Flower Songs).
- Multitude of Voices: An organization supporting female composers, offering licensed digital autographs and sheet music of Owen's works (e.g., arrangements for SATB choir) enriched with musicological commentary.
- University of Miami Scholarship Repository: A publicly available PhD thesis (The Life and Choral Music of Welsh Composer Morfydd Owen) that transcribes seven of Owen's previously

unpublished choral manuscripts into modern digital notation.

Music and discography

- Apple Music Classical and Spotify: Artist profiles aggregating contemporary recordings of her works, including albums such as *Portrait of a Lost Icon* (Brian Ellsbury, Elin Manahan Thomas) dedicated entirely to her piano compositions and songs.