

## Chapter 1

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### SEEKING THE WHITE RAVEN

*I have always felt a desire and need and curiosity  
to find out how much I could achieve.*

In October 1989, at the memorial concert of Ruth Wylie's music in Estes Park, Colorado, eight months after her death, her sister, Jeanne Wylie Torosian, chose to read to the audience a particularly moving statement the composer had written thirty years earlier while a faculty member at Wayne State University, in Detroit, Michigan. It was published in the campus newspaper's If I Had But One Lecture to Give series in November 1959.

Last week Villa-Lobos passed away in South America. This man wrote some of the most wonderful, sensitive, child-eyed music ever created. Unfortunately, and to some extent frighteningly, his death adds one more name to a list that in recent years has included Sibelius, Prokofiev, Honegger, Bartók, Vaughan Williams, Bloch, Ives, and others. And I wonder if any of you have marked these events with an awareness of their significance.

The special significance to be found in the passing of all men and women of genius, I think, concerns itself with the strange relationship between the living and the dead, the present and its history. Such people, by dying, have all passed through the glass into history where their works will be forever in view.

But how many of you saw them while they were still alive? How many discerned the first gleam of their genius? How many felt the

living history of their own time, or glanced more than casually to the sides where history is now? Did you hear them while they were here? Or will you always wait for death to command your attention and history to frame selected subjects for your view?

If I could leave only one influence upon you, as a musician and a teacher, I would pray that it could be this: Look around you at the history of now. Seek the voice that is still singing your own time on Earth. Look for the canvas freshly dried and just cool from the hand's warmth. Hunt for shells and pretty stones and autumn leaves that are yours. Hear the roaring of your own tigers, and the crying of your own little sadnesses. Understand now what Bartók sang for us for the future to hear. For we have Beethovens among us, and Purcell's lute still mourns today for the first, sweet time.<sup>1</sup>

When she wrote this in 1959, Wylie was forty-three years old; she had been teaching university-level music theory and composition for sixteen years, and composing music for longer. A few of the composers she named were particularly significant to her. She had worked with Arthur Honegger (1892–1955) at the Berkshire (now Tanglewood) Music Center in Massachusetts, in 1947. She had enjoyed the company of Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887–1959) during her residency at the Huntington Hartford Foundation Colony in California in the mid-1950s. Procedures she found in the music of Béla Bartók (1881–1945) and Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953) had been major formative influences during her doctoral studies at the Eastman School of Music twenty years earlier.<sup>2</sup> Now, in 1959, she was among the leading American university composers and teachers; her work was

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1 Statement is headed "Dr. Wylie: Grab for Gleam of Genius While It Lives," *The Daily Collegian*, November 25, 1959. The version reprinted here is what Torosian read at the 1989 concert; it omits a few sentences of personal description of Villa-Lobos and Honegger in the original.

2 Other composers Wylie names as among the recently deceased are Jean Sibelius (1865–1957), Ralph Vaughan Williams (1872–1958), Ernest Bloch (1880–1959), and Charles Ives (1874–1954).

well known in midwestern new-music circles. The *Detroit Times* reprinted her “One Lecture” statement with an admiring introduction by the paper’s music critic.

Like many composers of her generation, trained in the European-American art-music tradition, Wylie was imbued with the Romantic-Modernist aesthetic of individualism, innovation, and historical progress. In 1986, describing her work over almost fifty years, she wrote that she wanted to arrive at “a personal style which would lie comfortably in the mainstream” of her times.<sup>3</sup> With so many stylistic streams in the mid-twentieth century, identifying the main one was not easy for Wylie—or for any composer. Her process is the subject of the next twelve chapters, but a brief summary is in order.

For Ruth Wylie the musical mainstream was the progressive, modernist, academic tradition. Her training strengthened her high regard, even reverence, for the history of Western music, which she viewed as continually evolving through the efforts of successive generations of composers—a popular view at one time.<sup>4</sup> Endowed with a searching mind and independent spirit, she continually examined new musical ideas and techniques in the light of historical forces and future implications, and adapted elements that enhanced her own aesthetic.

The catalog of Wylie’s works in appendix A spans the years 1939–1988 and comprises sixty-one titles. Almost all of her music is intended for formal concert performance. Most of the works are for solo piano, instrumental chamber ensemble,

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3 Wylie, notes for Christine Armstrong, 1986.

4 Examples of the evolutionary view are histories by Marion Bauer and Ethel Peyser, such as *How Music Grew: From Prehistoric Times to the Present Day* (1925; completely rev. 5th ed., 1939); and *Music Through the Ages: A Narrative for Student and Layman* (1932; 3rd ed., revised and enlarged by Elizabeth E. Rogers as *Music Through the Ages: An Introduction to Music History*, 1967).

or orchestra. Through about 1965 she also wrote some vocal music—three songs, five choral pieces—and music for three dance productions. She was not drawn to opera, oratorio, other dramatic vocal genres, theater music, or film music. Her favorite genre was instrumental music, and she wrote for a great variety of instrumental combinations.

Like many of her contemporaries, she found her initial inspiration in the music of Bartók, Prokofiev, Paul Hindemith (1895–1963), and Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971). She explored chromatic harmony and expanded tonality, and devised what she called “planal” writing, combining planal (parallel) intervals to create distinctive harmony and counterpoint. Through the 1940s and 1950s, as she developed her own melodic and harmonic language, her works reflect the prevailing American neoclassicism in their sectional forms, linear procedures, and classical titles. Examples include her two symphonies (1943, 1948), two piano sonatas (1943, 1953), a sonatina (1947), three sets of piano preludes and “easy pieces” (1947, 1949, 1959), and the first three of her four string quartets (1941, 1946, 1954).

Important in Wylie’s thinking was the concept of *continuity*—in music, and as a metaphysical concept. Just as the human brain imposes its sense of continuity and motion upon separate particles of matter, she explained, a composer achieves continuity in music from separate pitches and events. She found ways of achieving continuity in sectional forms like sonata-allegro. Still, her goal was to let a musical idea evolve in a continuous gesture. Before actually composing a piece she would improvise at the piano on a certain idea, investigate its qualities in one direction, then another. She pondered how to shape that spirit of invention and transformation into an orderly, written score.

Into the 1960s she rejected many current trends. She resisted twelve-tone technique as too pat, too systematic. She was highly critical of “musimatics” or what she saw as the misuse of music and mathematics in total serialization and electronic music; in her view the “musimaticians” were destroying music’s humanity. She disliked the widely favored practice of borrowing material from folk music, from jazz, from non-Western cultures, or from earlier, pre-Romantic Western styles. She showed no interest in popular music; although she was working in Detroit in the 1960s, she was apparently quite unaware of the Motown phenomenon. She loved the Western classical tradition most of all, but its future direction was unclear and she struggled to find her place in it. In 1966, about midway in her career, she wrote with some despair that she was “attempting to navigate a sane and sensible course through the twentieth-century snake pit.”<sup>5</sup>

Actually, Wylie had already made much progress along that course through her work with ensemble improvisation, where she could reconcile the conflicting ideals of order and invention, tradition and progress. In the early 1960s she organized the Wayne State University Improvisation Chamber Ensemble, served as its director, and participated in its performances. As director she designed improvisation charts to guide the performers in new forms of musical invention. She adopted a number of avant-garde ideas, including aleatoric (chance) performance and indeterminacy, and she developed new kinds of graphic notation, substituting free-form designs for the five-line staff. Her improvisation charts are almost entirely indeterminate as to pitch, rhythm, texture, and form, leaving much of the “composing” to the performers. Even after the ensemble disbanded in 1968, she continued to cite her innovations in group

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5 Wylie, “What’s New, Pussycat?” (typescript, June 14, 1966).

improvisation technique as among her principal contributions to music and teaching.

When she returned to writing scores, she incorporated features of her improvisation charts. In the 1970s, after she retired from teaching and moved from Michigan to Utah and then Colorado, she produced some “experimental” scores—*Imagi* (1974) and *Mandala* (1978), among others—which require performers to decide what and when to play; every performance is different, as with an improvisation ensemble. In the 1970s and 1980s even her more traditionally notated works may include aleatory passages in which performers choose freely from several possibilities.

Wylie described her compositional technique in her later works as “continuous form,” which results from “continuous development” or “development in loops.” She begins with a generating idea, or “matrix,” and explores its possibilities in a certain direction. Then she refers back to the matrix in some way, and explores its possibilities in another direction. She can repeat the process any number of times, exploring further directions.<sup>6</sup> While many composers have embraced similar procedures, letting an initial idea or “germ” motive evolve in a quasi-organic fashion, Wylie considered continuous form, in its details, to be her particular process. The initial matrix, she explained, is not simply a theme or a motive, and subsequent development does not simply vary the matrix, but transforms it. Although elements of continuous form can be found in Wylie’s earlier pieces, only when she became conscious of composing that way could she explain her process in theoretical terms.

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6 Although in twelve-tone theory the matrix (Latin: *matrix*, womb, from *mater*, mother) is the total array of forty-eight possible permutations of a twelve-note row, Wylie uses the term differently, to mean a single generating idea.

She also reconsidered many of her earlier positions. She began to write twelve-tone passages. She became intrigued with the rhythmic density of electronic music, and imitated some of its effects in her instrumental writing. Her scores sometimes call for extended instrumental techniques. Toward the end of her life, in an interview published in 1985, under the title “Ruth Shaw Wylie: A Musical Consolidator,” she summarized her artistic aims: “I think of myself as a consolidator. That is, I try to study and evaluate all the new musical trends as they arise—twelve-tone, electronic, aleatory, computer, tonal modifications, microtones, whatever. Then I may use, at least to a limited extent, what in all of these trends I find to be aesthetically sound and creatively honest. I am rarely, if ever, interested in being enigmatic or esoteric.”<sup>7</sup>

A skilled chess player, Wylie often explained her compositional thinking as analogous to her thinking in a chess game. Both involved “examining future options and selecting the best or most promising, leading to more and more satisfying or completely fulfilled journeys.”<sup>8</sup> From the first “move” to the last, she planned each new piece. She was concerned for the “emotional meaning and affect of one single vertical sonority—how it was generated or made inevitable in that particular place.” She did not view aleatory as a gimmick or an abandoning of the composer’s craft and integrity; rather, “as in a complicated chess game, I have tested in my mind’s ear all the possible results,

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7 Wylie, “Ruth Shaw Wylie: A Musical Consolidator,” interview by the journal editor (probably Helen Dunn Bodman), *AWC News/Forum* (American Women Composers, Inc.) 9, nos. 2–3 (May–September 1985): 5, [http://www.iawm.org/articles\\_html/wylie.html](http://www.iawm.org/articles_html/wylie.html).

8 Wylie, letter to the author, September 17, 1986.

changing and revising my materials to ensure a result I can predict will be valid.”<sup>9</sup>

Apart from the sonatas, symphonies, and string quartets of her neoclassic period in the 1940s and 1950s, many of Wylie’s titles refer to personal sources of inspiration, mainly poetry, visual effects, and her own feelings and beliefs. Poetic texts are often by her favorite poet, her sister, Jeanne Wylie Torosian (1913–2003). One of the first compositions on Wylie’s work list is a setting of her sister’s poem *The Wanderer* (1941); Wylie’s last work, *Signs and Portents* (1988), is dedicated to her sister. Torosian’s words inspire the Suite for Orchestra: *The Green Pears* (1941) and they preface two orchestral works, *The Long Look Home* (1975) and *Memories of Birds* (1977).

Wylie was a painter as well as a composer—she exhibited her paintings in Detroit, Salt Lake City, and Estes Park and won awards—and she often used visual references in her music. In *Airs Above The Ground* (1977) her inspiration is the classical *dressage* of the famed Lipizzaner stallions of Vienna. *Scenes from Arthur Rackham* (1983) reflects her fondness for the famous British illustrator’s works. *Flights of Fancy* (1984) portrays “lines, curves, spirals, and arcs” in the natural world. Some works have a more personal reference. *Psychogram* (1968) reflects her emotional states during a difficult year. Two works, Sonata for Flute and Piano (1959) and *Toward Sirius* (1976), are in memory of beloved dogs. *The White Raven* (1983) expresses her belief in the enduring human search for beauty, a quality she believed to be as rare as a white raven in a world in which ravens are black. Her concerns about environmental damage and ecological imbalance inspire

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9 Wylie, “A Musical Consolidator,” 5.

two large orchestral works, *The Long Look Home* (1975) and *Views From Beyond* (1978).

Wylie loved animals, wild and domestic, and was intensely caring about them. She and her nephew Victor Wylie often talked about the time she saw a spider inside her steam iron and, before she would use the iron, took it apart to rescue the spider. She almost always shared her home with a pet dog; Toby and Joady, memorialized in the Sonata for Flute and Piano and *Toward Sirius*, respectively, were only two of many dogs who thrived from her devotion. In addition, she loved teddy bears and had a large and expanding collection.

While music was her main passion, she also loved sports, games, and crafts. She was proud of her skill in table tennis, horseshoes, and other competitive games. Her nephew Victor played tennis with her, as well as hardball catch, table tennis, and Frisbee. She won trophies in many sports and in chess. Besides painting, she took up crafts such as leatherworking, scrimshaw, and lapidary work, and she was able to sell her work. She was highly competitive and, according to close friends, suffered torments when she did not win, no matter what the game or contest. Her relationships with her siblings—besides her sister, Jeanne, she had a brother, Ray, a mathematics professor (Victor is his son)—included a degree of competition as well: she wrote poetry (her sister's art) and described herself, in certain circumstances, as a mathematician, too. Her unpublished poem *Beach Agate Pebbles* is appendix D; her mathematical references appear throughout her writings.

Wylie played many sports, including hockey, very well. She loved the Detroit Redwings and took Victor to hockey games and to his first Major League baseball game. When the Detroit Tigers

made it to the World Series in 1968 she dismissed her class so that they could watch Game 7 on television.<sup>10</sup> (The Tigers won.) In Colorado she liked the Denver Broncos football team. She enjoyed hiking, skiing, and canoeing. By the 1980s, however, she had developed emphysema, which she attributed to years of cigarette smoking, and she could not engage in vigorous activity. She competed in chess tournaments and was active in a chess club, a golf league, and a bowling team. In the 1985 interview she reflected on her disciplined approach in many areas.

I have always felt a desire and need and curiosity to find out how much I could achieve with the potential given me with my mind and body. To me that was why I was created. That was what I was supposed to find out. How fast could I learn to run? To jump or aim? To throw or hit a target? To make maximum use of my strength? To notice, compare, see, and hear the most I possibly could? To think and evaluate? To speak significantly and well? This driving need led me to engage in a great variety of sports and games, writing, lecturing, painting, and chess—resulting in much satisfaction ancillary to my chosen profession and, too, frequent frustrations.<sup>11</sup>

For Ruth Wylie, composing music meant creating windows into an infinite musical universe and thus participating in a cosmic process. Frustration was perhaps inevitable for someone with such a compelling vision of her art. For her, being a composer was an almost sacred calling.

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10 Charles Postlewate, email to the author, July 15, 2010.

11 Wylie, "A Musical Consolidator," 4–5.