

PREFACE

This book is intended as a tribute to the life and work of Ruth Shaw Wylie (1916–1989), a distinguished American composer and teacher. Born in Cincinnati, Ohio, she grew up in Detroit, Michigan, and was educated there and at the Eastman School of Music, where she earned a PhD in composition in 1943. She embarked upon an academic career as a composer and professor of composition and music theory, first at the University of Missouri in Columbia, and then at her alma mater, Wayne State University in Detroit, where she remained from 1949 to 1969. She then retired from university teaching to compose full-time. She moved west to the Rocky Mountains, first to Salt Lake City, Utah, and then, in 1973, to Estes Park, Colorado. She was writing music and advising performers up until a short time before her death.

Ruth Shaw Wylie described herself as “a fairly typical midwestern composer,” pursuing musical and aesthetic excellence but not attracting much national attention. In the middle decades of the twentieth century, as post-war prosperity brought increased public and private support for education and the arts, she was among the growing number of composers teaching at colleges and universities in Michigan, Missouri, Kansas, Illinois, Wisconsin, Ohio, and throughout the heartland who contributed to the growth of American “serious” music through their compositions and through their training and nurturing of

new composers, performers, music educators, and listeners. Ruth Wylie's music was widely performed, and information about her work appears in many reference books. This, however, is the first study in any depth.

I first met Ruth Wylie in 1981, after her move to Estes Park. I was on the musicology faculty at the University of Colorado at Boulder, about an hour's drive away, and she graciously agreed to speak to my classes on the history of women composers. She, and her music, elicited a warm reception from the students. Several student performers, as well as other musicians in the area, began presenting her works in concerts.

Christine Armstrong, a graduate student in the Doctor of Musical Arts degree program in piano performance, programmed Wylie's music at several important events and earned her deep gratitude, friendship, and support. In 1986, although Wylie was suffering from ill health and was reluctant to take time away from writing music, she allowed Armstrong to interview her. Further, to clarify her ideas for Armstrong, Wylie wrote many pages of elegant, detailed explanation of her compositional techniques. Armstrong completed her degree requirements by writing two research documents about Wylie's music.

I occasionally visited Wylie in Estes Park, and we exchanged phone calls and letters. She gave me a copy of her updated résumé and copies of some of her scores and published writings. I wrote two brief articles, one of them for a national publication, about her contributions to American music. I considered writing more, perhaps a book-length study, but did not pursue the project.

In 2003, fourteen years after her death, her nephew (Charles) Victor Wylie, MD, asked me to compile a book about her achievements. My earlier intentions resurfaced and I began to collect more information. Victor Wylie discovered concert

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programs, reviews, and publicity items, mainly from her years as a professor. He also persuaded Christine Armstrong, who continues her career as a pianist, teacher, and lecturer in Longmont, Colorado, to share her interview transcripts, along with scores and tapes from the composer's own library.

Through Christine Armstrong and Victor Wylie, I was able to interview the pianist Anna Husband, a lifelong friend of Ruth Wylie from Eastman. I interviewed another of Wylie's longtime friends, the composer Frank Retzel, who studied with her in the late 1960s at Wayne State University; he is now a professor of music at Fordham University and St. John's University in New York, and organist and director of music at the Church of Mary's Nativity in Queens. He continued to correspond with her until her death. He arranged performances of her work and after her death produced a recording of her piano music.

More of Wylie's former students shared reminiscences as well. James Hartway, who studied with her in the 1960s, now holds her former position directing the music composition and theory programs at Wayne State University. Milton Olsson is director of choral and orchestral activities at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, and composes when time permits. Robert Harris, professor of conducting and ensembles and director of choral organizations at Northwestern University's School of Music, is a widely published choral composer. Frederick Fox, composer and professor emeritus at the Indiana University School of Music, was a student in her undergraduate theory classes around 1950 and continues to name her as among his teachers. John Rea is a composer and professor of music at McGill University in Montréal. The double-bassist Don Lewandowski graduated from Wayne in 1965. Virginia Catanese, who played clarinet at Wayne and

conducted an orchestra in Detroit, now teaches part-time in the humanities program at Wayne. Her sister Barbara Catanese Havlena, who wrote her master's thesis in musicology under Wylie's direction, teaches at Macomb Community College in Warren, Michigan. Arthur Lieb, Wylie's undergraduate student in the late 1950s, is retired from the Library of Congress. The composer Michael G. Cunningham, Wylie's student in the late 1950s and her colleague at Wayne State in the 1960s, is retired from the faculty of the University of Wisconsin–Eau Claire. The guitarist Charles Postlewate, who completed his undergraduate degree at Wayne in 1969, is retired from the faculty of the University of Texas at Arlington.

So why did Wylie's work not become more widely known? The main reasons, as Wylie herself understood, had to do with style, geography, and gender. Her compositional style was progressive and contemporary, while the wider public was more conservative in its taste. Audiences at university concerts, festivals of new music, composers' forums, and the like appreciated her music, at a time when general audiences increasingly favored traditional and predominantly European repertoire along with the more populist American composers of the 1930s and 1940s. American composers of approximately Wylie's generation whose music had wide appeal, such as Leonard Bernstein and Samuel Barber (neither of whom depended upon teaching for a living), were few in number.

Geography was another factor. Among Wylie's contemporaries—American composers born within one or two years of her birth year of 1916—the best known are largely those who worked in New York City, at Ivy League schools, or elsewhere in the eastern United States. Prominent figures include (besides Bernstein and Barber) David Diamond,

Vincent Persichetti, George Perle, Milton Babbitt, Ulysses Kay, George Rochberg, Robert Palmer, and Esther Williamson Ballou. Midwesterners like Ruth Wylie, Joseph Wood, Scott Huston, James Ming, Gordon Binkerd, Robert Kelly, Merrill Ellis, James Niblock, and Cecil Effinger, along with many others, are often considered “regional” composers of less-than-national significance.

Finally, as a woman, Wylie was assumed to be of inferior ability in some professional situations. She had to overcome that psychological obstacle, as did her public. In the 1970s and 1980s the revival of interest in important women musicians and artists brought wider recognition to Wylie’s work, and she understood more of her own experience as gender-related. Unlike women who are writing music in the twenty-first century, however, she did not seem to perceive how being a woman affected her approach in any positive way.

Besides style, geography, and gender, her particular personality influenced reception of her work, if only in subtle ways. Although she was highly competitive by nature and won many awards and commissions, she was uncomfortable promoting her own music. Owing perhaps to midwestern reticence as well as personal modesty, she did not dramatize her feelings and elicit audience response. She was not a networker or a political strategist on behalf of her compositions. She was frustrated by the performances of inexperienced players and students for whom twentieth-century modernism was a challenge. Fortunately, her music has also enjoyed skilled performances by musicians and conductors who specialize in “new music”—performances that reveal her extraordinary skill and sensitivity. Appendix A, the catalog of Wylie’s works and

their performances, documents a wide range of concert venues and personnel.

One of Ruth Wylie's goals was to gain recognition for her innovative, carefully wrought scores. Like other successful artists, she persisted in spite of disappointment. Her story, like her music, is inspiring and enlightening. It also reveals more of the rich history of American music in the twentieth century.