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## Radie Britain: Composing the American Hero

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THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF MUSIC

RADIE BRITAIN: COMPOSING THE AMERICAN HERO

By

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To Mom and Dad

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## ABSTRACT

Radie Britain (1899-1994) was a successful American composer by almost any measure. Despite her long and productive career, Britain remains on the periphery of scholarly literature. In part this could be a result of Britain's compositional style, which is reminiscent of an older romantic style in terms of its thematic development, orchestration, and harmonic palette; but it could also be a reflection of a more general absence of women composers in the musicological literature. My thesis hopes to address this situation as it regards one woman. The thesis provides a biographical sketch of the composer based on her autobiography and the composer's archive. It also discusses three pieces by Radie Britain that were inspired by American heroes: "Heroic Poem" a tribute to Charles Lindbergh, "Epic Poem" also known as "Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson" and "Light" dedicated to Thomas Edison. Written between 1927 and 1934, Radie Britain's compositions were performed numerous times by orchestras throughout the years of the Great Depression. These works show Britain to be a composer of her time, and a musician deserving our attention today.



## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Radie Britain (1899-1994) was a successful American composer by almost any measure. Despite her long and productive career, Britain remains on the periphery of scholarly literature. In part this could be a result of Britain's compositional style, which is reminiscent of an older romantic style in terms of its thematic development, orchestration, and harmonic palette; but it could also be a reflection of a more general absence of women composers in the musicological literature. My thesis addresses this situation as it regards one woman.

It is easy to dismiss composers who have been omitted from the history books: we might assume that they were incompetent at their task or otherwise deserving of disregard. There may be other reasons, however, why a composer is missing from scholarly discourse, including a chosen compositional style or gender. By questioning Britain's absence, the scholar can use her career as a lens through which to understand not only Britain in a biographical sense, but also to understand the musical culture within which she functioned.

The first chapter presents a survey of Britain's career and introduces many issues that this thesis will address including her absence from musicological studies, Britain's professionalism, and the role of one of Britain's greatest patrons, the Federal Music Project. Chapter two provides a biographical sketch of Radie Britain. Prior to this thesis the only biographical information available was either that provided by Britain herself, or similar brief biographical sketches that appear throughout the literature. This chapter focuses on years of exceptional compositional productivity in the 1920s and 1930s, and draws upon Britain's writings and additional documentary evidence found in the Radie Britain archive located at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas-Austin.

The third chapter is a discussion of three pieces by Radie Britain that were inspired by American heroes: "Heroic Poem" a tribute to Charles Lindbergh, "Epic Poem" also known as "Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson" and "Light" dedicated to Thomas Edison. Written between 1927 and 1934, Radie Britain's compositions were

performed numerous times by orchestras throughout the years of the Great Depression. These works show Britain to be a composer of her time, and a musician deserving our attention today.

The last chapter offers conclusions from this thesis and comments on Britain's professional life, observations about her musical style, and the role gender played in her career. Moving beyond conclusions, the chapter looks forward to new directions in Radie Britain scholarship with a call to action for a variety of studies dealing with this composer.

The position of American tonal traditions in the scholarly literature is one issue raised by a study of Britain's music. One of many composers who wrote tonal music during this time, Britain's contemporaries include: Aaron Copland (1900-1990), George Gershwin (1898-1937), Virgil Thomson (1896-1989), Howard Hanson (1896-1981), Roy Harris (1898-1979) and William Schuman (1910-1992). Despite the volume of music and relative popularity during their own time, many of these composers are underrepresented in the scholarly literature. Larry Starr discusses the issue in his chapter, "Tonal traditions in art music from 1920-1960" in *The Cambridge History of American Music*:

There were an extraordinary number of American composers of modern, tonal concert music, who came to prominence in the period between the World Wars. But an equally extraordinary historical development ensued: in the years following World War II only Gershwin and Copland from this group seemed to remain securely in the repertory, while the others found their careers in a state of gradual or sudden eclipse.<sup>1</sup>

In a historical record that emphasizes the new, Britain's use of a more traditional tonal idiom may be one reason she is relatively unknown. An examination of Britain's music shows her compositional style relies on thematic development and orchestration to express ideas.

Another issue raised in this thesis is the absence of women composers in music history. As musicologist Denise Von Glahn observes, "Until the 1980s, notable American women composers were few in number; their activities were limited in scope. Social

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<sup>1</sup> Larry Starr "Tonal traditions in art music from 1920-1960" in *Cambridge History of American Music* edited by David Nicholls, Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 481.

mores and circumscribed educational opportunities had discouraged and denied women's pursuit of professional musical careers."<sup>2</sup> Britain's career illuminates opportunities women had for composition in American music culture, and where other women composers may have found success.

A study of Britain's music also calls attention to the Works Progress Administration (WPA), which provided an outlet for Britain's music. The WPA was a part of Roosevelt's New Deal to put people to work during the Great Depression, which lasted from the late 1920s until the early 1940s. The Federal Music Project (FMP) was created as a part of the WPA.<sup>3</sup> Specific aims of the program directly benefited Radie Britain, including the desire to include music by both Americans and women. Federal Music Project scholar Kenneth Bindas explained the goals of the FMP: "American composers [were to] receive fair and equal consideration, and it 'recommended' that at least one-fourth of all programs be music produced by Americans."<sup>4</sup> In 1937 Nikolai Sokoloff, FMP director announced, "WPA music projects are for all sexes, thoroughly American in spirit the FMP considers only ability to perform... women play along side of men in the orchestras."<sup>5</sup> By seeking equality for women in the concert hall, for the first time women were accepted as performers, conductors and composers. Bindas observes, "In fact, many of the sexual barriers that prevented women from participating in music were weakened for the first time with FMP aid. Women composers' works were seriously considered for the first time, women conductors held the podium before male orchestras with regularity, and women musicians performed alongside men in many of the first

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<sup>2</sup> Denise Von Glahn, "Chapter 1" *Music and the Skillful Listener: American Women Composing the Natural World*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012. Forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> For more information on women specifically in the Federal Music Project, a program of the Works Progress Administration consult the chapter "Stepdaughters of Orpheus: Women Musicians and the FMP." Kenneth Bindas *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society*, Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press; 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth Bindas *All of This Music Belongs to the Nation: The WPA's Federal Music Project and American Society* Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press; 1995. 16.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 86.

sexually integrated orchestras.”<sup>6</sup> That Radie Britain and her music were part of these pioneering efforts makes a study of her all the more important.

The music of Radie Britain was a good match for FMP orchestras. Unlike many of the modernists of her generation, she wrote in a tonal idiom, which would have appealed to the conservative tastes of Sokoloff.<sup>7</sup> Besides her heroic compositions, she also wrote pieces inspired by her homeland (*Southern Symphony* and *Hail Texas*) as well as numerous nature-inspired pieces. Her patriotic bent appealed to the political needs of the FMP and WPA.

All three pieces studied in this thesis are works that were performed by FMP Orchestras. All pieces were composed within a decade and received many awards and honors. Britain’s involvement with the WPA also provides an opportunity for discourse concerning her professional life, her involvement with other composers, the marketing of her works as a “woman” composer, and her patriotic topics. In a sense Radie Britain’s career provides a window into the functions of the government program, although Britain was not exclusively dependant on the Federal Music Project. She composed for nearly 70 years and during that time conductors, critics, and women’s music clubs regularly acclaimed her works. Her story is one that illuminates not only the career of one woman who composed but also how women functioned in the WPA.

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<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

## CHAPTER II

### BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Radie Britain was born 17 March 1899 on a ranch in Silverton, near Tulia, in West Texas, the third of Edgar and Katie Britain's five children.<sup>8</sup> Edgar, who was commonly referred to as E. C., started as a ranch hand and eventually owned numerous ranches himself. The American dream of working from nothing to something, from rags to riches, would be passed from E. C. and Katie to their daughter, Radie.

The Britains built their first home outside of Amarillo. Although she had never lived there, Radie describes it in her autobiography as having three rooms including a four-foot dug out hole for the kitchen and built from lumber personally hauled by E. C. Britain.<sup>9</sup> The family eventually moved to outside of Tulia when E. C. acquired another ranch with better soil. This is where Radie was born. She had an older brother, a younger brother and a younger sister. She also had had an older sister who died at birth. E. C. and Katie were very involved parents, interested in providing educational experiences for their children that they themselves had not. The family was always on the move as E. C., who was described by Britain as a very savvy businessman, regularly sought a new ranch acquisition or business venture. In Britain's teen years the family moved to Clarendon, Texas. While E. C. rationalized the move as a business opportunity, he also liked the idea of living close to Clarendon College, a small Methodist school, which he saw as beneficial to the education of his children. The Britains had a piano in their home and Radie began to play. She took lessons from Miss Wedgeworth, a graduate of Dresden Conservatory and R. Deane Shure, a graduate of Leipzig Conservatory.<sup>10</sup> Radie proved herself to be an ambitious student, often practicing five hours a day.

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<sup>8</sup> Walter B. Bailey and Nancy Gisbrecht Bailey, *Radie Britain: A Bio-Bibliography*, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Radie Britain *Ridin' Herd to Writing Symphonies*, Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press Inc., 1996. All biographical information has been taken from this source and cross-referenced with the bio-bibliography for verification of dates. Britain was purposefully ambiguous about dates in her autobiography.

<sup>10</sup> Shure would be the first of many to advise Radie about the perils of marriage for a woman. She recalls in her autobiography him telling her "Radie, if you don't marry too early, I predict you will become a famous musician." This stayed with Radie throughout

Britain's first college experience was at Clarendon College, which she attended as a young teen. Clarendon, however, was more of a finishing school and Radie quickly felt restrained by the school's strict rules which included being forbidden from speaking to members of the opposite sex and dancing. Britain broke these rules and was nearly expelled from the school. Despite her behavioral difficulties Britain excelled in music; she studied piano and harmony. At age 15 she entered her first harmony course, which was an advanced course, six weeks after the class had been in session. While her teacher felt certain that she would be fine entering the class late in the term, Britain lamented feeling uncertain about the fundamentals of music theory for years to come.

After Clarendon College, Britain attended one year at Crescent College in Arkansas. While this was not what Radie had in mind when she brought home catalogues for Boston and Cincinnati conservatories, she realized that she could use her time there as leverage to convince her father that her education needed to be continued, and continued away from the state of Texas. While Arkansas was clearly outside of Texas, it was much closer to home than either Boston or Cincinnati, which made E. C. open to the idea of her attending Crescent. E. C. believed that whatever Radie needed, she could find in Texas.

Texas is the first and in many ways the most pervasive place influence in Britain's life.<sup>11</sup> Growing up on a ranch she was subjected to a different set of gender roles than in other more urban parts of the country.<sup>12</sup> While she grew up in a strict Methodist home with the father seen as the head of the house, women were essential to the success of the family in all domains. Britain describes her father's and mother's relationship saying "With strong loving united hands, this eighteen-year-old girl and twenty-two-year-old

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her young adult life. The author cannot help but wonder if male composers ever received similar advice. Britain, 32.

<sup>11</sup> While it is not an indicator of influence, it is interesting to note that the finding aid lists an artifact titled "A Texas-shaped box of dirt." This makes sense when you consider passages of Britain's autobiography in which she discusses collecting dirt from around the world for her daughter, LeRae. LeRae kept dirt from everywhere, while Britain only kept dirt that was presumably from Texas.

<sup>12</sup> Earle F. Layser "The Equality State : Women's Rights on the Western Frontier." (*World and I* Mar. 2003): 186. Layser discusses how women in the western frontier states were afforded rights sooner than the East Coast. Women owned land and held office in Wyoming in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. While Britain lived in Texas, many of the same pioneer principles were at work in her own household.

man set their hearts in granite to make a success of their lives. No sacrifice was too great for they had the iron will to have something in life—and to *be somebody!*”<sup>13</sup>

Her home state also provided professional support for Britain. The women’s music clubs of Texas were some of the first champions of Britain’s music, often having meetings dedicated to the playing of her music. The Amarillo papers followed Britain’s every move, reporting upon every award, achievement and homecoming.<sup>14</sup> In 1958 Britain received an honorary doctorate from the Musical Arts Conservatory in Amarillo.

Throughout her life Britain wrote works inspired by her home state. Her first piece alluding to her childhood home was *Western Suite* for piano, which she composed in 1925. In her autobiography Britain reflected on writing the piece: “The nostalgia that creeps over me when I am far from home stimulated the phantasy. Relief came from capturing the mood in music...I dedicated the *Western Suite* to my beloved parents.”<sup>15</sup> Her affinity for Texas pieces would soon again inspire her compositions, with *Hail Texas* for voice and piano in 1927. Her *Southern Symphony* was composed at the MacDowell Colony in 1935 and she orchestrated the work at her Palo Duro Canyon studio.<sup>16</sup> While according to the program notes the majority of the symphony is rooted “in the deep south” suggesting a region other than Texas, the Adagio is described as “built from a cowboy tune, and is dedicated to the composer’s father.”<sup>17</sup> The piece received its first performance by the Illinois Symphony Orchestra under Izler Solomon; the *Chicago Examiner* reviewed the performance noting,

The piece is generously dotted with Southern melodies, orchestrated in a manner that enhances tenfold the value of their simplicity, in an instrumentation alive and palpitating with the ardor of Miss Britain’s Texas ancestry.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Britain, 7.

<sup>14</sup> A large number of articles detailing Britain’s professional career can be found both in her personal scrapbooks located at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History at the University of Texas in Austin.

<sup>15</sup> Britain, 160.

<sup>16</sup> Britain 194.

<sup>17</sup> Box 2.325/K71a, Scrapbook #2, Radie Britain Papers, 1914-2007, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas Austin. The program was dated March 4, 1940.

<sup>18</sup> Bailey and Bailey, 113.

*Canyon* and *Drouth*, both pieces for orchestra composed in 1938, draw upon Britain's Amarillo home.<sup>19</sup> Other Texas-related pieces appeared over her compositional career including: "The Lasso of Time" (TTBB chorus, 1940) "All Alone on the Prairie" (voice and piano, 1945) "Red Clay" (orchestra, 1946) "Paint Horse and Saddle" (orchestra, 1947) "Cactus Rhapsody" (Orchestra, 1953) "Cowboy Rhapsody" (orchestra, 1956) "Ridin' Herd in Texas" (piano, 1966) "Sam Houston" (orchestra, 1987) and "Texas" (orchestra, 1987).

It is clear that Texas was integral to Radie Britain's musical identity. From landscapes to cowboy songs, the compositional output based on Texas is sizeable. No other topic consumed Britain as much as Texas, despite the fact she only lived there about a quarter of her life. No matter how long she stayed away, Texas was always her home.<sup>20</sup>

When Radie left Texas for the first time in her life to attend Crescent College in Arkansas, Katie helped convince E. C. of Radie's need to "fulfill (her) destiny."<sup>21</sup> E.C. and Katie eventually agreed that Radie would be able to attend college far from the state of Texas. While Radie would have preferred Boston Conservatory, where a friend of hers had gone, E. C. was insistent on the American Conservatory of Chicago, believing that Radie would do better in school without pre-existing friendships, which he equated with social distractions.<sup>22</sup>

By the time Britain left for college E.C. and Katie were financially sound. E.C. insisted that Radie bring a checkbook with her to college to buy necessities, but also to keep up socially with the other girls. Radie's access to her parents' money allowed her to

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<sup>19</sup> Britain, 219. Anyone who has visited Amarillo is familiar with its proximity to the canyon. *Drouth* had a specific purpose, to draw attention to the devastation brought on by the drought, which affected many people across the South, including Britain's own family.

<sup>20</sup> Britain, 345. In her autobiography Britain recounts the feeling of returning to Texas from her many travels.

<sup>21</sup> Britain, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Britain, 65. This never worried Britain, she considered herself very sociable person and knew that she could make friends anywhere, especially in a city like Chicago. "Papa evidently didn't realize I was a very gregarious person. I hardly knew what a stranger was."



have an education as well as participate in an active social life. This financial arrangement was in place until Radie was wed in 1930.<sup>23</sup>

In 1919, Radie Britain departed for Chicago with high ambitions. Her mother had already planted the seeds of gold medals in her mind and Britain was determined to work her hardest. While at the American Conservatory (1919-1921) she studied piano with Henoit Levy, and organ with Frank Van Dusen. In 1920, at the end of her first year, she was awarded her teaching certificate as well as an Honorable Mention in Pedagogy, a Special Honorable Mention in Piano and a Gold Medal in Organ.<sup>24</sup> She returned the following fall to complete her Bachelors in Music in 1921.

After Britain completed her degree she was offered teaching positions at both the American Conservatory as well as Clarendon College. Her father was insistent on her return to Texas so Radie accepted the position at Clarendon. Before returning to Texas, however, she remained for the summer to attend the piano master classes of Leopold Godowski. Although she could not play in his master classes because she was only an auditor she was determined to sit in and listen to Godowski teach.

When Britain prepared to return to Clarendon her spirited behavior continued to haunt her. She was almost fired before the school year began. The school contacted E. C. informing him of news that Radie had been seen dancing in Amarillo: if it were true, they wanted Radie to resign. E. C. interceded, but it confirmed Radie's fears that teaching at the school would be just as restricting as studying there. After one year of teaching she declined the offer to return the following year and opted to open a private piano studio. Knowing that her father would not provide financial support for her going abroad, Britain saved all the money she earned from teaching for a trip to Europe. She broke the news to him two weeks before her departure to Paris in 1923.

In France Radie studied with organist Marcel Dupré for a year. While France provided many social experiences for Britain she did not find the musical stimulation she was looking for. She returned to Amarillo to teach for another year before heading to

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<sup>23</sup> Britain, 57, 181.

<sup>24</sup> Britain often credits her organ skills as bolstering her orchestration skills.

Germany for study. At first Britain intended to study piano with Adele Aus der Ohre<sup>25</sup> in Berlin, but soon after her arrival she reconnected with old friend and opera singer Leone Kruse who introduced Britain to the composer and critic Albert Noelte who convinced Britain to move to Munich to study with him. After showing Noelte some of her composition projects from her time at the American Conservatory he decided that she showed definite promise as a composer. With Noelte as a teacher Britain made her first attempt at composition that was not intended to fulfill an assignment for a harmony course.

Britain's debut as a composer came in Munich, Germany in May 1926 when baritone Eric Wildhagen of the Munich Opera premiered four of her songs, "Had I a Cave," "Open the Door To Me," "Nirvana", and "Withered Flowers" with Britain at the piano. Otto Halbreiter published the songs with texts translated into German. The reviews from critics were overwhelmingly positive, giving Britain the confidence she needed to continue composing. Dr. G. Gerheuer of the *Münchener Zeitung* even compared her to the nation's most treasured composers in their youth when he wrote, "Even if not all the difficult poems which the composer had chosen were exhausted to their last meaning, so do we not hold this against her, and Radie Britain may find consolation in the fact that Beethoven and Wagner at the same age and stage of development could not do that either or any better."<sup>26</sup> Britain appeared to be on her way.

The sudden death of her sister necessitated Britain's return to the U.S. two weeks after the debut. Nolte soon joined Britain in America where she had decided to continue her studies and they both took teaching positions at the Girvin Institute of Music and Allied Arts in Chicago, Illinois. Britain composed and had her works performed by some of the country's most respected orchestras. This period of orchestral composition began nearly immediately after returning to Chicago. During this time Britain not only started a stable professional life in Chicago, but a family as well.

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<sup>25</sup> Adele Aus der Ohre (1864-1937) is remembered as a student of Liszt and an active concertizing pianist. Liszt had many students but he rarely accepted child prodigies like Ohre. Many writers including Amy Fay and Harold Schonberg recorded accounts of Ohre's playing.

<sup>26</sup> Britain, 167.

Britain had never had trouble finding love. At certain points her autobiography reads more like a romance novel than a music-centered chronicle of her life.<sup>27</sup> From love triangles across the ocean to relationships with local politicians, Britain rejected a number of marriage proposals. She saw marriage as something that could damage her career, but at the same time she was not willing to give up her relationships with men. Often these ended with men pledging unrequited love to Britain. This was until a persistent bachelor, Leslie Moeller, finally succeeded in gaining Britain's hand in marriage.

Leslie Moeller and Radie Britain were married in June of 1930.<sup>28</sup> In ways the relationship was both ideal and problematic. Britain describes how she met Moeller saying, "Friends at the Plaisance Hotel introduced me to Leslie Moeller, a dashing forty-year-old bachelor. When I opened my apartment door, I was looking at a handsome brunet with slightly graying temple, hazel eyes, and the strongly set jaws. He was groomed like a fashion model with his black derby and black coat with velvet collar."<sup>29</sup> To outsiders, Britain and Moeller seemed like the perfect couple. They both came from wealthy backgrounds and could make numerous social connections at the surrounding country clubs. Moeller set his sights on marrying Britain from the start. He lavished expensive dinners and gifts upon Britain, but she was apprehensive. She reflected that,

I did have reservations even though I was fulfilling a dream in fairyland. I realized these experiences were not stimulating my creativity. No words were spoken that would open avenues for the imagination to soar. I needed to associate with my artist friends to find communion in the creative field.<sup>30</sup>

At first Britain rejected Moeller but after some convincing Britain finally agreed and they were married. As Britain speaks of the marriage there is a marked negativity in her narrative. She uses foreshadowing to emphasize her doubts, as well as the displeasure

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<sup>27</sup> Part of this is due to the impetus for Britain's work, a letter from her daughter LeRae urging her mother to write an autobiography covering everything from being a woman composer to beauty tips and romantic stories. I believe the title, *Ridin' Herd to Writing Symphonies: An Autobiography*, is telling of how Britain herself viewed the book: the life of a composer. In Britain's archive there is a Mead Notebook with the working title: *A Cowgirl becomes a Classical Symphonic Composer*.

<sup>28</sup> Britain, 381.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 178.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

the decision met from both her parents and her teacher, Noelte. While this account may benefit from hindsight, Britain portrays her first marriage as an unhappy time in her life.

The marriage lasted from 1930-1939, and during that time she wrote some of her most popular compositions. Part of her success was due to her husband's career. Being a successful paper product salesman Moeller was gone from their home for numerous hours a day and Britain was left to create in peace for long periods of time without any financial worries. The negative side of this marriage was that Moeller did not see the merit of Britain's profession. Rather he viewed it as a frivolous act that people with actual jobs like himself afforded to people like his wife. Britain notes his annoyance at her need to attend concerts in the evening and quoted him as saying "Why can't these concerts be in the afternoon? You are free to hear all of them. I've got to make a living to keep you people playing music for one another."<sup>31</sup> He even begrudgingly attended his wife's own concerts. Britain quotes their conversation about her music saying, "Music is music—but don't expect me to understand it... I may doze off occasionally. Don't forget I've been working all day."<sup>32</sup> While she quickly became disenchanted with her husband any thoughts of backing out of the marriage were put to rest when Britain found out she was pregnant in 1931.<sup>33</sup>

The role of mother was a complex part of Britain's life. While she gave birth to one child, LeRae Britain-Moeller, she considered herself to be the mother of numerous "brain-children": her compositions.<sup>34</sup> Whether she used this phrasing in everyday conversation or if it was a term she coined for her compositional process as an afterthought is unknown. There is a peculiar correlation, however, between Britain's phrasing and the thinking of conductor Modest Alschuer when he wrote to her, "Here is praying for your 'muse' that you will be pregnant with for a long time."<sup>35</sup> The association

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<sup>31</sup> Britain, 201.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 200.

<sup>33</sup> Bailey and Bailey, 11.

<sup>34</sup> Throughout Britain's autobiography she refers to her compositions as brain-children.

<sup>35</sup> Box 2.325/K71a, Scrapbook #2, Radie Britain Papers, 1914-2007, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas Austin. Letter from Alschuer to Britain in Scrapbook #2.

of Britain, a woman, being pregnant with compositions seems to be a gender specific metaphor, unlikely to be applied to male composers.

A popular composition of Britain's was titled "Infant Suite." The FMP Orchestra of Los Angeles premiered the piece on February 21, 1936. The program note provides context for the audience:

Finding time to raise a family in Chicago as well as to write music that is winning for her plaudits in Europe as one of the most promising of young American creative artists, Miss Britain completed this suite at the MacDowell colony last summer. This is its first performance anywhere.<sup>36</sup>

It is apparent that motherhood was not only part of Britain's reality, but also part of her persona marketed to the audience. Britain represented an exceptional everywoman, raising a family and enjoying a successful career.

While the idea of motherhood had not been immediately appealing to Britain, in part due to her unstable marriage, she embraced this time of her life. She often composed with Lerae close by, thus balancing motherhood and a career in the most immediate of ways. Despite their growing family, the relationship between Britain and Moeller would not last. On November 5, 1935, violinist and composer Richard Czerwonky premiered Britain's piece "Prison" for violin and piano. This was also the day that Britain first encountered the man who would become her second husband, Edgardo Simone.

When Britain's piece ended, Simone, who was in attendance, stood up and shouted "Bravo!" After the performance Britain was informed that the boisterous fan was a well-known sculptor, Simone. Britain did not formally meet him that night but a short time later Simone attended another of Britain's performances of "Light."<sup>37</sup> According to Britain, Simone was shocked that a woman had the capacity to write such music. He rushed backstage; Britain described the scene that ensued,

"What beautiful music you make, like an angel—from the heart. Only once before have I heard such inspired music from a violin solo—called *Prison*. He tore my heart out with such a glorious melody. I can't recall the composer's name.

"I wrote *Prison*." There was a hushed second.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid, Program in Scrapbook #2.

<sup>37</sup> Britain often referred to "Light" as her "Light" Orchestration.

“You-you wrote *Prison*. Now this masterpiece. My dear, you are a genius!” He bowed and kissed my hand again.<sup>38</sup>

Britain always bragged that her relationship with Simone was straight out of Hollywood. She even wrote an account of their story in an unpublished novel titled, *Bravo!*, featuring two lovers, Rodie and Emilio.<sup>39</sup> While their story has never made it to the silver screen, the tumultuous next few years were certainly as dramatic as any of Hollywood’s fictional love triangles.

At this time Britain was still married to Moeller but her friendship with Simone blossomed. Moeller had always encouraged Britain to maintain her friendships with artists, and she obliged making no secret of her relationship with Simone. Simone’s friendship provided a spark for Britain. The two often discussed their art with one another, suggesting themes or topics for new projects. Simone was especially interested in Britain’s compositions. He would hum tunes to Britain and suggest topics to her. When Britain composed something that moved him Simone would sculpt a piece of art and give it a similar name.<sup>40</sup>

During the remainder of her marriage to Moeller, Britain lived in Chicago. She balanced motherhood, a friendship with Simone, her marriage, and a professional career. Chicago provided a variety of opportunities for Britain, not only for performances and teaching positions but also for professional connections. She made friendships with conductors, composers and artists across the city and participated in the vibrant musical culture of Chicago.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Britain, 204.

<sup>39</sup> Manuscripts of *Bravo!* are housed in Britain’s archive at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History. Many passages are identical to Britain’s autobiography except for the name changes.

<sup>40</sup> Britain, Un-numbered picture insert. This page contains a photograph of Britain posing with Simone’s sculpture “Pastorale.” It was modeled after work under the same title, composed in 1939.

<sup>41</sup> Britain, 172-229. Many events can be verified by comparing Britain’s account with her scrapbooks containing photographs, newspaper clippings, and musical programs.

She was not a shy person, and she actively sought out conductors, engaged in conversation with them and delivered her scores to them. Britain understood the importance of the relationship between the conductor and the composer. While the composer had the means of creation, the conductor held the means of communication. Without a conductor and an orchestra there was no conduit for Britain's compositions. She developed relationships with women conductors of the day, including Ebba Sundstrum, Fanny Arnsten-Hassler, Ruth Haroldson, Gladys Welge and Ethel Leginska.<sup>42</sup> Leginska premiered her first work for orchestra, *Symphonic Intermezzo*, in 1928.<sup>43</sup> During this time she also became acquainted with Dr. Nicolai Sokoloff of the Works Progress Administration. Through this connection she encountered conductors Modest Altschuler, Richard Czerwonky, Edgar Schenkman, Izler Solomon, and Albert Goldberg.<sup>44</sup> Two of the most prestigious conductors to program Britain's work include Howard Hanson and Frederick Stock.

Howard Hanson was first introduced to Britain's work through the WPA. When he invited Britain to a premier he addressed his telegram to Mr. Radie Britain. Britain often credited misunderstandings such as this with bolstering her professional success. Britain turned down the request to travel to the premier of her piece because she was pregnant with Lerae at the time.<sup>45</sup> Hanson programmed the piece alongside that of one of his own prodigies, William Grant Still, at the American Composers' Concert at the Eastman School of Music.

In 1938 Albert Noelte got in touch with Frederick Stock on behalf of Britain.<sup>46</sup> He was convinced that Britain's work, especially her "Overture to Pygmalion" deserved to be played by one of the most prestigious orchestras in the country, the Chicago

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<sup>42</sup> Britain, 402.

<sup>43</sup> Bailey, 27. A picture of Britain and Leginska posing together after the performance can be found in scrapbook #2 in the holdings of the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History.

<sup>44</sup> This should not be considered an exhaustive list of conductors Britain had contact with during her time with the WPA. This list was compiled from Britain's autobiography and the collections of programs contained in her personal scrapbooks.

<sup>45</sup> Radie Britain *Composer's Corner* Hollywood, CA: Highland Music Company, 1978, 40.

<sup>46</sup> Britain, *Ridin' Herd to Writing Symphonies*, 175.

Symphony Orchestra. Stock agreed to play Britain's work but there was a problem. The Greek legend of Pygmalion is a rather sensuous story that Britain recounts in one of her program notes:

The Overture, "Pygmalion" is founded upon the ancient Greek legend which tells of the sculptor who was so dissatisfied with the imperfection of woman that he resolved to make a statue of ivory so beautiful that it would be beyond compare with any living woman. The festival of Venus came and Pygmalion prayed to possess a wife who would be the equal of the ivory virgin. Returning to his home he made love to the statue and to his astonishment, it came to life. Opening her timid eyes to the light she fixed them at the same moment on her lover. Venus blessed the nuptials and from this union Paphos was born, from whom the city sacred to Venus received its name.<sup>47</sup>

The only day available to play Britain's music was Good Friday. Surely people would not tolerate such a sexually charged myth on a religious holiday. Frederick Stock offered a solution for Britain, he suggested she change the name of her work to "Prelude to a Drama" and to claim that the piece was based on Schiller's "Resurrection" poem. Britain decided to adopt Stock's suggestion, explaining that the open title gave agency to her listeners, "Being honest by nature I felt a tinge of guilt in camouflaging a work of red-blooded passion as a serene and spiritual work. I have kept the title, however, so the listener can draw on his own imagination without depending on program notes."<sup>48</sup>

Britain continued to write programs for her music after "Prelude for a Drama" but she also left many of her compositions without any extra-musical associations. She relied on her relationships with conductors to provide venues for her music but had to compromise as a result. It does not seem trivial to point out that Britain's original "Prelude to Pygmalion" is the only one of her works to have a sexually suggestive program. The effects of censorship marked the piece past the specific incident with Stock. Britain willingly kept the new name and program change for her piece. One can only speculate whether she realized that the original controversial program could pose a problem. Operating within the musical mainstream Britain had to make certain compromises that left a permanent mark on her oeuvre.

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<sup>47</sup> Box 2.325/K71a, Scrapbook #2, Radie Britain Papers, 1914-2007, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas Austin. See program notes for Illinois Symphony Orchestra, January 31, 1937 under Albert Goldberg.

<sup>48</sup> Britain, 175.



Britain's years in Chicago proved to be a period of rewarding creative and professional growth. During the time spent there, in addition to becoming a mother, she taught composition and harmony, composed over forty works, won numerous national awards and built a professional network of musicians, composers, and conductors. While Chicago never appears to be a source of inspiration in Britain's pieces the way Texas does, the influence the city had on Britain's career is undeniable. Many of the connections she made there would endure throughout her life. Despite her positive associations with Chicago, the city was also the site of a tumultuous home life that Britain could no longer endure. Britain left the city and her husband Moeller in 1939 to move to California with Simone and Lerae.<sup>49</sup>

Britain planned not to marry Simone too soon after the divorce. It seemed prudent for them to wait for a period of time so that the cause of the divorce would not be evident to either Moeller or her parents.<sup>50</sup> When Britain joined Simone he was living and working in Coronado, California. Due to a housing shortage and the difficulties associated with finding a place to live, however, Britain and Simone married in 1940, much earlier than they had planned. They quickly became active in the artistic life surrounding the San Diego area. A lack of professional opportunities caused the couple to move to Hollywood.

In Hollywood Britain and Simone came across a property that they named "Casa del Sogno" or "the house of our dreams." Casa del Sogno provided a creative haven for the two artists.<sup>51</sup> With proper studios they both could take on students and keep up their personal projects. Simone became involved with sculpting in the various movie studios. The new marriage provided a different home life than Britain had experienced with Moeller. Simone could not provide financial security for Britain, but she brought her own money from her various awards, teaching engagements, and royalties. It is also possible Britain was still receiving money from her parents, despite becoming financially independent after her marriage to Moeller.

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<sup>49</sup> Bailey and Bailey, 12.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, 13.

When living with Moeller, Britain had enjoyed large periods of alone time, whereas life with Simone provided numerous distractions throughout the day. Often these were welcome distractions and Britain's relationship with Simone appears to have inspired many compositions during the time of their marriage.<sup>52</sup> Britain's new marriage and move to California affected not only her personal relationships and daily life but also the professional landscape in which she functioned.

Britain immediately plugged into the professional community in California. Both during her time in the San Diego area and in Hollywood she worked closely with local conductors to arrange performances for her pieces and resumed private teaching. Britain's compositional output during this period remained steady. California landscapes provided numerous inspiration for pieces and resulted in "Serenada del Coronado," "San Luis Rey," "Jewels of Lake Tahoe" and a composition inspired by her home, "Casa del Sogno," which she reworked in different orchestrations numerous times. California does not appear in Britain's compositions as often as Texas but she obviously formed an artistic connection with the place.

In 1949 Simone suffered a stroke that affected his creative abilities; shortly afterward he died from complications. Britain remained in California after his death and remained professionally, creatively and politically active there. In 1959 she married Ted Morton, an aviator. They lived the remainder of their lives together, Morton dying in 1993 from cancer and Britain passing away shortly after in 1994.

Britain lived in California for 54 years, and completed works until she was in her late eighties. In addition to composition, she frequently published articles for the League of American Pen Women and served as an editor for their magazine. She also wrote four books during this period: *Bravo!*; *Major and Minor Moods*; *Composer's Corner*; and *Ridin' Herd to Writing Symphonies*.<sup>53</sup>

Radie Britain's life spanned almost an entire century of American history. She enjoyed a variety of opportunities recently made available not only to women composers, but to American women more generally. During a time when women were beginning to enter the workplace in larger numbers, Britain embraced a professional career without

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<sup>52</sup> Britain often discusses the impetus for her compositions in her autobiography.

<sup>53</sup> These writings have been consulted for this study.

hesitation. For over 70 years Britain personally insured that her compositions were heard across the nation and abroad. She ran a successful piano studio, taught composition, managed her finances and edited a national magazine. She did this while raising a family and produced a works list of over 280 compositions in nearly every genre.

### CHAPTER III

## COMPOSING THE AMERICAN HERO

Britain's music embraces a variety of trends and topics. In an effort to better understand her music and compositional process as a whole, this chapter explores one topic, the American hero, as it appears in three pieces. All three works were composed between 1927 and 1935. Each piece is tied to a specific American hero, either by title, program or dedication. As is typical in American history, all of the heroes are men, but they have little else in common: one is a president, the second is an aviator, and the third is an inventor. These works also appealed to the WPA and were each featured in WPA orchestra concerts. The following is a set of three studies, each exploring the history, reception, and musical attributes of the piece.

#### "Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson"

"Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson," written in 1927, was Britain's first composition for string quartet. To this point Britain had only written a handful of pieces for voice and piano. When Britain composed this piece the title was not its final one, but rather "Epic Poem." "Epic Poem" is one of many pieces Britain titled and re-titled, adding to the confusion and misinformation surrounding many of her works.

On a manuscript copy of "Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson" a piece of tape clearly covers the original title. By holding the paper up to the light, however, it is easy to see that the piece was originally named "Epic Poem." The exact date of the name change is unknown, but Britain makes it clear that "Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson" is the name she wished the piece to be known by.<sup>54</sup> That is how she refers to it in her autobiography and it is titled as such in her bio-bibliography for which the authors personally consulted with Britain.

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<sup>54</sup> Box 2.325/K71a, Scrapbook #2, Radie Britain Papers, 1914-2007, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas Austin. See program Composers' Forum on May 4, 1936 where piece is titled "Epic Poem."

The name change of the “Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson” is potentially significant because it invites alternative interpretations of the piece. An “Epic Poem” could easily be about any number of people or events; the musical portrait will be associated with one very specific individual, the third president of the United States of America. Britain shifted the meaning of her composition from an ambiguous tone poem to a patriotic piece depicting an American hero. But is the music of “Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson” actually intended to paint a picture of Thomas Jefferson, or has Britain renamed the piece to generate performances or better her career, as she did with “Prelude to a Drama” when she changed the name to please Frederick Stock? There is not a clear answer to this question because Britain does not comment on the name change in any of her papers.

There are some reasons that Britain may have wanted to change the name. There may have been a contest or commission that she needed to fulfill without the time to compose. This seems unlikely because the majority of her commissions were for songs. There could also be a composition contest that had a specific theme or topic that she wished to submit the piece under. Another possibility could be that she renamed the piece for Thomas Jefferson’s bicentennial birthday (1943). As late as 1936, programs still listed the piece as “Epic Poem.” Renaming the piece for Jefferson’s birthday would have made the piece more marketable. The manuscript also has her Hollywood address written in the back, suggesting that she may have revisited the piece after moving to California in 1939. It is significant to note that beyond the title that has been taped over in the manuscript there is no reference to Thomas Jefferson and there is no dedication. If “Prelude to a Drama” is an indication that Britain could rename a piece without musical inspiration, then it can be assumed that her first piece inspired by an American hero may not have been inspired by anyone at all.

The title of the piece was not the only name change on the manuscript copy of this piece. Below the title, Britain’s name is written on two layers of tape. Evidently Britain had initially decided to remove her name from the document and replace it only with the word *Maestoso*, the opening expression marking. Since the same type of tape was used it seems likely that Britain replaced her own name at the same time that she renamed the piece. At some point Britain returned her name to the piece by adding another layer of the

same kind of tape. Why Britain would want to omit her name from her work is as mysterious as why she would change the title of the piece in the first place but a few possible explanations come to mind.

Britain could have been facing a crisis in confidence, a condition that Marcia Citron addresses in her chapter, "Creativity." Confronted with the task of composition, Citron suggests that many women suffer from an "anxiety of authorship," which can manifest itself in ambivalence towards a piece, a lack of confidence, and a retreat from publishing under one's own name.<sup>55</sup> Britain's confidence in her work seems to well up from the pages of her autobiography, making this solution seem preposterous at first. Pausing for a moment, however, one must remember that the Radie Britain taping over her name was not the same Radie Britain who wrote the autobiography in 1978. As many as fifty years younger this Radie Britain had achieved few of the accomplishments she enjoyed later in life. It is not unreasonable to consider anxiety of authorship as a possibility for why she would have erased her own name.

It is also possible that Britain saw her gender as an inhibiting factor, although on many occasions Britain mentions that her name helped her because it was unusual enough that it could be mistaken for a man's name. Hanson first mistook Britain for a man and it is possible that he was not the only one. Bailey and Bailey speculate that her ambiguous name could have been why she received the Juilliard Publication Prize.<sup>56</sup> Britain could still have worried that her name would get in the way of the piece's success.

A third possibility seems less practical than the other two that have been explored. It is possible that Britain erased her name from the composition when she gave the piece a different and what she may have considered a false program. Britain admitted to feeling guilty when she changed the name of "Prelude to Pygmalion" to "Prelude to Drama" because she was "camouflaging a work of red-blooded passion as a serene and spiritual work." Perhaps Britain once again felt guilty, disguising a work as a musical portrait of an American president. Unless a closer look at Britain's papers reveals some new information about both name changes, her rationale will remain uncertain. What is certain

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<sup>55</sup> Citron, 54.

<sup>56</sup> Bailey and Bailey, 11.

is that Britain ultimately decided to identify the work as her own by putting her name on the cover.

One of the greatest misconceptions about “Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson” is that it was played at the White House in 1936. Britain’s bio-bibliography perpetuates the misinformation by repeating the incorrect date in the biographical sketch.<sup>57</sup> While the piece was still titled “Epic Poem” Britain won the 1936 Bonita Crowe Prize Award from the National League of American Pen Women. As part of the award “Epic Poem” was performed at the NLAPW annual meeting in Washington, which according to Britain’s program notes, occurred on April 15, 1936.<sup>58</sup> Britain’s music was then also included on a program at the White House for a tea in honor of Mrs. Franklin Delano Roosevelt; it was also sponsored by the National League of American Pen Women. According to the program found in Britain’s scrapbook that concert took place on Friday, April 17, 1936 and Britain’s piece on the program was a string quartet titled “Bondage.”<sup>59</sup> While “Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson” was not performed at the White House the piece still represents an important development in Britain’s oeuvre.

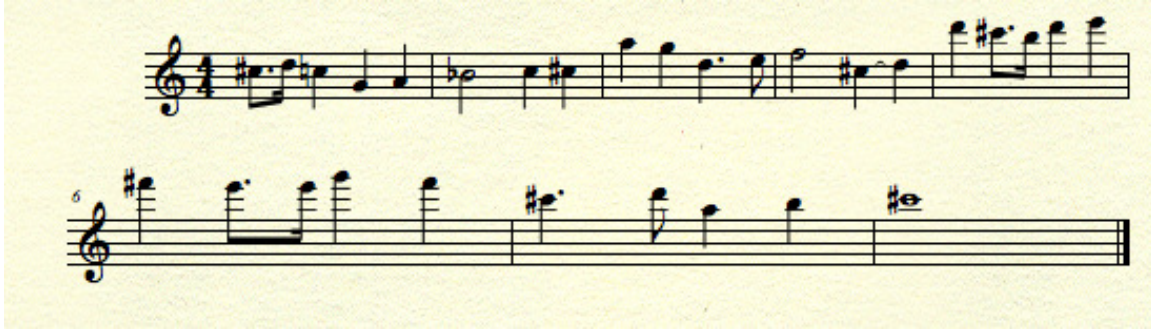
Britain’s eight-minute string quartet “Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson” opens “Maestoso-with decision” as the quartet strikes a unison dotted eighth-sixteenth note followed by three quarter notes in common time. The principal theme is largely chromatic, beginning on C# moving generally upward over the course of eight measures before reaching a C# sharp an octave higher. The theme is rhythmically simple, made up of straight quarter notes characterized by the occasional dotted-eighth sixteenth note.

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<sup>57</sup> Bailey and Bailey, 11.

<sup>58</sup> Box 2.325/K71a, Scrapbook #2, Radie Britain Papers, 1914-2007, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas Austin. See program Composers’ Forum on May 4, 1936 where piece is titled “Epic Poem.”

<sup>59</sup> “Bondage” could be the piece “Prison” under a different name. She also titled the piece “Lament.” Originally for violin and piano she also arranged it for string quartet and violin with small orchestra. Britain also mentions in passing that “Prison” and “Lament” were played at the White House. “Bondage” does not seem to relate to either the name “Epic Poem” or “Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson” and she speaks of the meeting and the White House concert in relation to two separate pieces in her program notes for the Composer’s Forum on May 4, 1936.



Musical Example 3.1 Opening Theme “Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson”

Whether Britain is dealing with an epic poem or a musical portrait could mean two very different things for the musical structure of a piece. By definition, an epic poem is “a long narrative poem celebrating the great deeds of one or more legendary heroes in a grand ceremonious style.”<sup>60</sup> It might lend itself to a musical portrait on the other hand if it only portrays one person or theme.

Britain’s music in many ways supports the idea of an epic poem. There is a distinct fast-paced rhythmic character to the theme. There is never a time where the music seems to suspend time. As Britain uses pieces of the theme in successive iterations each could be viewed a different part of the story. The motion never stops.

Britain fragments her themes, the pieces of them in various parts of the composition. After the exposition of the eight-measure theme Britain explores different moods. In measure nine it seems as if the theme will be resolved; the listener wonders if it was actually just an introduction, rather than an integral part of the character. This moment quickly gives way to an unstable passage utilizing melodic and rhythmic fragments from the theme.

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<sup>60</sup> Chris Baldick "Epic" *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. Oxford University Press, 2008. *Oxford Reference Online*. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oxfordreference.com.proxy.lib.fsu.edu/views/ENTRY.html?subview=Main&entry=t56.e390> (Accessed 20 March 2012 ).



Britain's expressive marking "Andante con moto quasi allegretto" signals the next appearance of the theme. The same opening gesture that introduced the work appears in the viola part, this time with a completely different character. The melody is gently traded to the violin part and the meter changes from common time to 3/4 time. The theme is now lyrical and dance-like with markings "molto espressivo" and "molto appassionato." At measure thirty-eight the marking changes to "Un Poco Allegretto e Grazioso" and the texture thins, leaving the first violin to play a version of the theme disguised by triplets before breaking into a reappearance of the second half of the theme. A textural difference alerts the listener that the theme is familiar but at the same time it is reconceptualized by its surroundings. The different characteristics of the theme may communicate different personality traits of Thomas Jefferson, or different perspectives on his portrait.

As this softer version of the theme fades into *pianississimo*, an "a tempo" brings back the original tempo which introduces a fragment of the original theme once again. In measure fifty-seven the theme returns in its original register, marked *maestoso*, with only some changes to the harmonic progression, as if to refocus the audience from the variations back to the original theme.

The next mood that follows in measure sixty-five is marked "Tempo Rubato but not dragging" and is a duet between the second violin and the viola. The viola plays sixteenth notes and triplets against the original thematic material in the violin. The two voices move upward, with each entrance a third higher, giving this section a questioning feel. The first violin and cello enter reinforcing the feeling of unrest. This continues until measure eighty, where there is an appearance of the original theme in the second violin part.

The forte "Marcato" beginning at measure eighty-five does not recall of any other part of the piece even though it presents a fairly clear articulation of the melody. There is a staccato rhythm in the cello that moves in a chromatic descent, adding to the dance like nature of these four measures. The stark change in texture and rhythmic character prepares the listener for the recurrence of the original theme.

Britain's preservation of the theme throughout the piece is the greatest argument for the piece as a music portrait. Acting as a sort of ritornello, the theme is either used in fragment or in whole to remind the listener of the subject of the piece. In fact the theme is

presented in its entirety three times, in the exposition, in the center, and near the end of the piece. The fragmented theme appears once more before the music ends, making the theme the last thing a listener hears.

In this way the piece acts very much like a musical portrait. There is the outline of a character in the main theme, where essential qualities are presented in a single musical idea. As the piece continues one is reminded of standing in an art museum, where after considering a painted portrait the observer steps back and looks at the likeness from every angle. While what one sees varies in perspective, the subject stays the same. Britain presents these perspectives of the theme through fragments and variations but preserves the original theme throughout the piece.

### Heroic Poem

Radie Britain composed “Heroic Poem” in 1929 after being inspired by Charles Lindbergh’s transatlantic flight. Approximately 13 minutes in length, the piece is a through-composed tone poem for orchestra. “Heroic Poem” is a picturesque portrayal of Lindbergh’s flight, developing numerous themes with a combination of orchestration effects to simulate atmospheres associated with the journey, such as a storm and a combination of the United States and French anthems as Lindbergh reaches his destination. It is Britain’s third piece for orchestra, following “Symphonic Intermezzo” (1928) and “Prelude to a Drama” (1928). Orchestral works were Britain’s favorite pieces to write, as she noted in a 1988 interview: “Orchestra is my great love. I never get as much satisfaction out of writing for piano or violin. It doesn’t fulfill what I’m searching for. I love the color and the way you can make your melody fit like a glove with the instruments.”<sup>61</sup> Britain did not shy away from writing for such a large ensemble; she embraced it. The piece is known for having been awarded third place in the International Hollywood Bowl competition and winning the Juilliard Publication Prize.

The awards won by “Heroic Poem” have been significant both for the reception of this particular piece and for Radie Britain’s reception as a whole. Most biographical sketches of Britain, whether in a program note or in an encyclopedia entry, will mention

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<sup>61</sup> Bailey and Bailey, 19.

her “Heroic Poem” as having won these two prominent awards. The Hollywood Bowl Competition was prestigious because it was an international competition and the judges had named no winners the previous year.<sup>62</sup> By winning this award in 1930, Britain announced her presence as an American symphonic composer on the international scene.

A widespread misconception about the Juilliard Publication Prize is that Britain won the award in 1930.<sup>63</sup> A possible reason for this could be that the two awards, the Hollywood Bowl and the Juilliard Publication Prize, are often listed together. If one source listed these as both being awarded in 1930 it may have been reprinted numerous times. Britain did not win the prize until 1945. A letter addressed to Radie Britain dated June 8, 1945 notified her of the award and details associated with it: 500 copies would be printed, five copies for the composer, fifteen copies for the conductors of her choice and all of the publication costs would be covered by Juilliard.<sup>64</sup> Later that month on June 28, Britain received a Western Union Telegraph: “You are the only woman composer to have won the Juilliard orchestral publication competition= Oscar Wagner.”<sup>65</sup> Britain was the first woman to win this award, it just did not happen in 1930.

In the matter of awards and achievements a noteworthy award is one that Radie Britain did not win. In Britain’s scrapbook, along side her accomplishments, programs, and important telegraphs, is a letter from Daniel Gregory Mason regarding the Pulitzer Travelling Scholarships.<sup>66</sup> The letter dated March 3, 1937 and printed on Columbia University letterhead reads:

Miss Radie Britain  
5225 Blackstone Avenue  
Chicago, Illinois

My dear Miss Britain,

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid, 104.

<sup>63</sup> This is misreported in *Grove Music Online* and *Radie Britain: A Bio-Bibliography*.

<sup>64</sup> Box 2.325/K71a, Scrapbook #2, Radie Britain Papers, 1914-2007, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas Austin. See letter addressed to Radie Britain discussing details of the composition prize.

<sup>65</sup> It would be interesting to know if Oscar Wagner sent this by telegraph because he thought it was important for Britain to know or because Britain inquired about the award.

<sup>66</sup> Pulitzer Travelling Scholarships were awarded between 1927-1943 and are considered the precursor to the Pulitzer Prize in music.

I am sorry to be the bearer of what will strike you as bad news in telling you that you did not win the award of the Pulitzer Travelling Scholarship in Music.

At the same time I feel impelled to write you a line to say that at the meeting of the jury, which took place yesterday morning, two of the three judges were so impressed by your work that we were obliged to consider some time before adjusting our estimates of other works offered. I for one feel that your Heroic Poem is extremely effective orchestrally and dramatically. I do not feel the musical content is always quite up to the dramatic effect but it should certainly be an impressive piece when played by a good orchestra.

I wanted to write you these few lines to let you know it was appreciated and to express the hope that we may see more work of yours later on.

Yours sincerely,  
Daniel Gregory Mason  
MacDowell Professor of Music<sup>67</sup>

Mason's letter appears meant to comfort Britain, alerting her to the fact that she nearly won the scholarship and that her work was thought highly of. It is also reasonable to deduce that Britain felt positive about the letter, at least as positive about a rejection letter as one can be, by saving it. Britain did not keep any other negative reviews or rejection letters in her scrapbooks. While it cannot be certain that Britain was denied this award because of her gender (Mason cites vague flaws in the work) no woman would win the Pulitzer Travelling Scholarship or Prize until Ellen Taaffe Zwilich won in 1983 for her *Symphony No. 1 (Three movements for Orchestra)*.<sup>68</sup>

Unlike many of Britain's pieces, there is no question about the program of "Heroic Poem." From the beginning Britain draws on Lindbergh's flight that occurred between May 20-21, 1927. The inside cover of the 1945 Juilliard edition reads,

This piece, dedicated to the memory of a heroic feat, does not desire to be classed as a 'Symphonic Poem' in the generally accepted sense of this term. It does not

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<sup>67</sup> Box 2.325/K71a, Scrapbook #2, Radie Britain Papers, 1914-2007, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas Austin. See letter from Daniel Gregory Mason to Radie Britain, dated March 3, 1937.

<sup>68</sup> <http://www.pulitzer.org/bycat/Music>, accessed February 6, 2012. There is a significant amount of confusion surrounding these awards. At the current time there is no complete list of the awards. An incomplete list of recipients can be pieced together from composers' resumes and one master's thesis that does not provide adequate citations for the claims made. According to this thesis, Britain lost the award to Ross Lee Finney.

attempt to picture, or to strictly follow, the various mechanical and realistic phases of this heroic adventure although, on the other hand, it does not entirely avoid allusion to such realistic phenomena as are characteristic of and inseparable from the nature of this adventure and the technical means of its realization.<sup>69</sup>

As Britain writes in this introduction she avoids direct references to Charles Lindbergh, but she acknowledges the use of the two anthems in the finale of the piece, one of the strongest allusions to Lindbergh's story. In the program notes for the premier performance with the Rochester Philharmonic under Howard Hanson on March 3, 1932, the program notes are more specific: "Her heroic poem is dedicated to a memory of an heroic feat. It does not attempt to suggest circumstances but it is not without musical allusions of some realistic intent. In a general way the music was inspired by the trans-Atlantic flight of Colonel Charles Lindbergh."<sup>70</sup> Another program from the Chicago Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by Richard Czerwonky, on July 26, 1936, has printed "Heroic Poem, 'Lindbergh's Flight to Paris'" making the program of the piece even less ambiguous.

Britain regularly expressed that the piece was not a direct representation of Lindbergh's flight, but she does not deny the relationship between parts of the piece and parts of the story. This may be due to the fact that Britain was not working from an actual flight log or journal. Upon hearing the piece, it is difficult for a listener not to connect the music with imagined parts of the trans-Atlantic flight. The tone poem explores the American hero in three distinct ways: as a singular being in the hero's theme, as part of a journey through sound effects and story-like aspects, and as an American, marked by the appearance of the national anthem and military signifiers near the end of the piece.

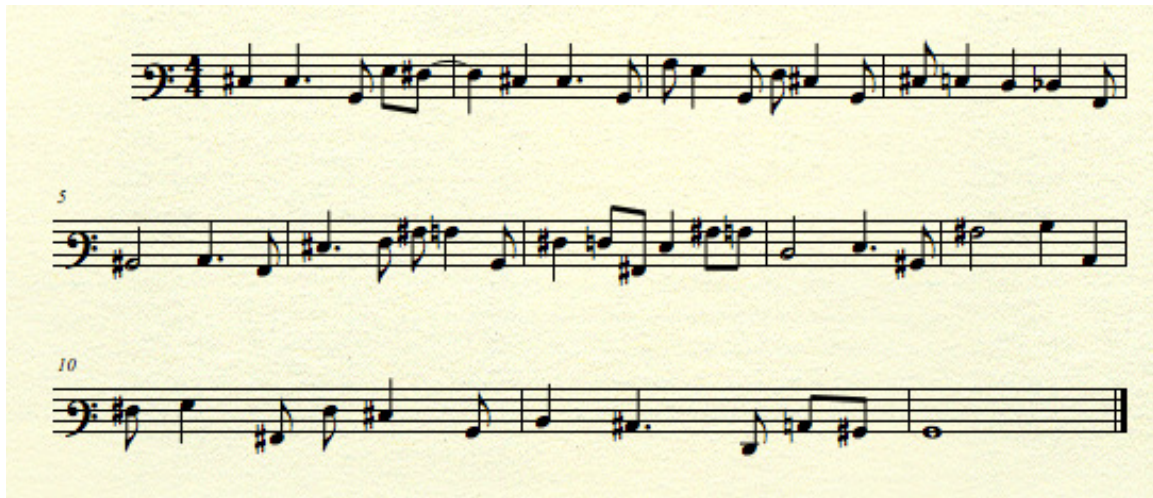
"Heroic Poem" opens with the pianissimo theme sounding as if far in the distance. The theme is introduced by the cellos and the bass clarinet and then is passed to the bassoons and double bassoon. Low range instruments paired with a quiet dynamic make

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<sup>69</sup> Radie Britain *Heroic poem* New York: Published for the Juilliard School of Music by The American Music Center, 1946.

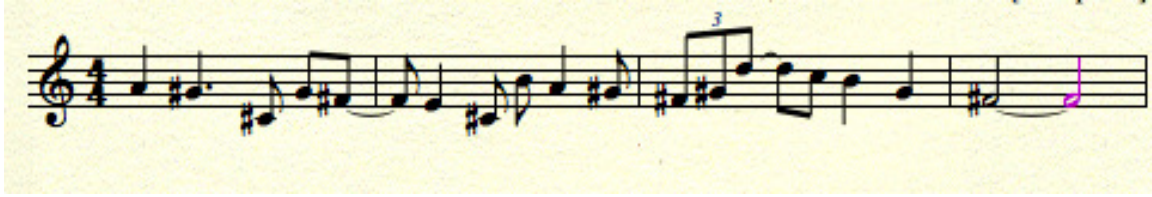
<sup>70</sup> Box 2.325/K71a, Scrapbook #2, Radie Britain Papers, 1914-2007, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas Austin. See program for American Composers' Concert on March 3, 1932, conducted by Howard Hanson. It is not clear who wrote this program note. Often conductors would request a note from Britain about her piece and this may be a response to such a request.

the chromatic, disjunct theme more mysterious. The theme is characterized by large leaps of major sixths and sevenths and by general chromatic descending motion. Other instruments gradually join in increasing the dynamic level and thickening the texture. Perhaps the opening is an observer's view as the plane approaches.



Musical Example 3.2 Heroic Poem Theme 1

The hero is introduced alone. As the plane enters the scene the focus of the story is one man, one theme. While other themes and elements are introduced, they all center around the quest of one man. Both the cantabile and maestoso themes are prevalent throughout the work but are tangential to the opening theme. These themes are used to develop the opening theme, which remains on the periphery even as the cantabile theme is introduced in m. 20. It quickly becomes the focus after the theme's exposition. When the opening theme returns in m. 80 the texture of the music changes. The previous measures explored the maestoso theme, breaking it down into small fragments before all that is left are the horns and violas playing the opening theme accompanied by scalar passages on the harps. This passage serves to refocus the listener, away from the journey and back to the hero before the maestoso theme enters once again.



### Musical Example 3.3 Maestoso Theme

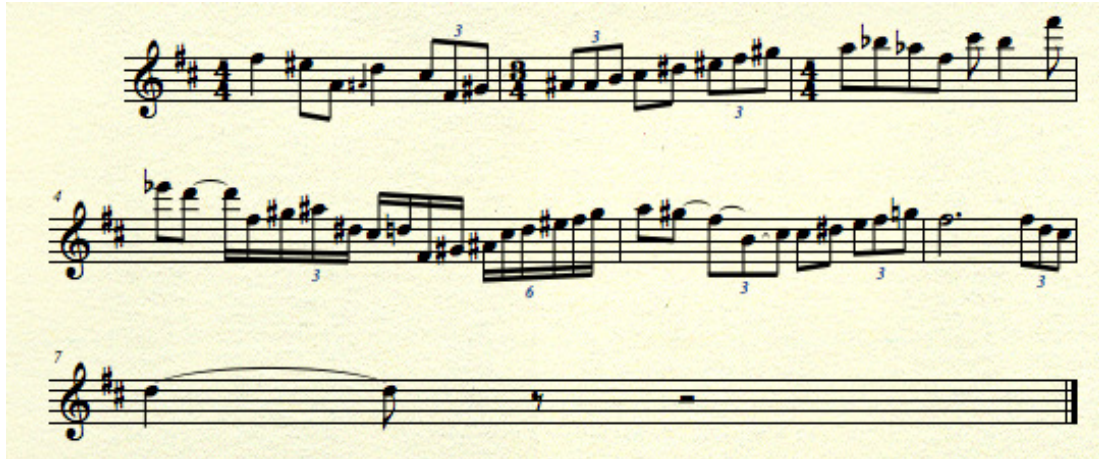
Even as the hero approaches land and the busy-ness of drums and anthems fill the score, the hero's theme is still recognizable. He stands as the central figure, motivically woven throughout the various themes and situations. Britain could have made a number of aspects of this piece the focus: the sky, the plane, nationalism, but she revolves each of these aspects around the hero himself.

While the hero is the focus of the piece, he is constantly in the process of a journey. Within this journey Britain uses a number of orchestral devices including harp and flute scalar passages, timpani rolls and the celeste to illustrate the hero in a story-like way. As mentioned, Britain's use of these thematic developments propels the story line. By using easily recognizable fragments of the themes, Britain keeps the listener engaged as she develops and combines the themes.

Britain also uses the music to paint a picture of the landscape. Beginning in m. 28 a fragment of the opening theme is repeated in ascending intervals. This broken ascent gives the listener a sense that the plane may be trying to ascend. In m. 38 the maestoso theme is introduced as the plane has finally taken flight. The maestoso theme is played by the horns and trumpets accompanied by scalar passages in the flutes, the celeste and the harp. The combination of instruments provides a shimmering effect.

Similar descriptive orchestration is used in measure 129 when Britain illustrates what seems like a storm. Prior to the storm's entrance the solo violin picks up from the horn and plays the maestoso theme. The clarinet enters with the lyrical theme in measure 121. A number of instruments enter at different times, creating a counterpoint of themes. The sky is busy once again. The strings and clarinets begin with descending thirty-second notes, which give the allusion of swirling air. As instruments enter the sound becomes

more chaotic. The trumpets and trombones blare the *maestoso* theme in measure 136 but the instruments fade with the storm until only the timpani is left.



Musical Example 3.4 Lyrical Theme

Just as Britain puts the hero in the context of the elements and the journey, she also introduces him as a part of humanity. There is no mistaking the plane's approach to the shore when the martial snare drums enter in measure 172. The military-like rhythms are superimposed with the opening and *maestoso* themes, placing the hero firmly within his surroundings.

Beyond simply humanizing the subject, Britain identifies the hero as an American. The music continues to build and in measure 227 the trumpets enter with the "Marseilles;" it is quickly interrupted by the "The Star Spangled Banner." The final 32 measures trade the two anthems back and forth, not favoring one more than the other. Our hero is not only human, battling the elements and surviving the journey, but he is an American, bringing America to France. There is a triumphant mood to the last measures. As the anthems fade they blend with the other themes climaxing with the entire orchestra playing a C major block chord. The journey is completed; the hero is triumphant.



## Light

“Light” was composed at the MacDowell Colony in 1935. According to Denise Von Glahn in her chapter discussing another American composer Amy Beach, “The [MacDowell] Colony had been conceived by Edward and Marian MacDowell as a refuge for artists from across disciplines—music, art, literature—who could unwind in the sylvan setting of their Peterborough acreage, commune with nature, and draw nourishment from interactions with other inspired creative colonists.”<sup>71</sup> Beach was the person responsible for bringing Britain to the MacDowell Colony.<sup>72</sup> Both Britain and Beach were members of the National League of American Pen Women. Britain thoroughly enjoyed her time at MacDowell over the course of two summers and composed a number of pieces including: “Infant Suite;” “Nocturn;” “Noontide;” and “Light.” Britain reflected on her time at the New Hampshire retreat in her autobiography:

The New Jersey Cabin was my secret shrine for two seasons, with a grand piano, large table, fireplace, and divan. Surrounded by tall pine trees, it was several blocks from any other studio. We were not permitted to have visitors in our studios. Without any interruptions in the entire day, I accomplished as much in six weeks as I could in an entire year in Chicago. It taught me the importance of seclusion when one creates. A sensitive mood can be easily destroyed by a telephone call, a question.<sup>73</sup>

Britain’s time at the MacDowell Colony was one of uninterrupted creative production. She would long for the quiet of MacDowell for the remainder of her career.

“Light” was the second composition that Edgardo Simone had heard composed by Radie Britain. He had not realized that “Prison,” the piece he had so admired, was written by a woman and he doubted her ability to write a piece on as masculine a topic as Thomas Edison. Britain quoted Simone as he anticipated the piece,

“Imagine what a fiasco it will be. An American woman writing for the orchestra. This new music is without a soul. But with a woman? What [does] she know about an orchestra?...Imagine dedicating this *Light* to Thomas Edison, who illuminated the path of mankind. Edison posed for me. He’s a colossal subject for

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<sup>71</sup> Denise Von Glahn, “Chapter 2: Amy Beach” *Music and the Skillful Listener: American Women Composing the Natural World*. Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2012. Forthcoming.

<sup>72</sup> Britain, 196.

<sup>73</sup> Britain, 196.

a giant composer like Wagner. My God! A woman will massacre the subject with feminine frills. Too bad—too bad.”<sup>74</sup>

With thinking like this, it was no wonder that Britain was apprehensive about revealing her gender. She chose to write about “masculine” topics, like great men, for orchestra, which was considered, by Simone and many others, a masculine ensemble. Britain similarly worried in her own comments: “Women, writing in the larger symphonic form, have never found it to be a *bed of roses* and, perhaps, never will...”<sup>75</sup> The Chicago Women’s Symphony Orchestra premiered the piece on November 29, 1938 with Gladys Welge conducting. “Light” was the only piece by a woman composer on the program that included works by Bach, Tchaikovsky and Borodine. The piece went on to win the First National Prize of the Boston Women’s Symphony Orchestra, a WPA Orchestra, in 1941.<sup>76</sup>

In the program for the premier Britain included a detailed set of notes to accompany her work. She described her intentions for the themes and some of her compositional process:

‘Light’ was inspired in the woods of Wisconsin, written at the MacDowell Colony at Peterboro, N.H. and orchestrated in Chicago in 1936. The colossal man—Thomas Edison—inspired the composer to set to music a tone-poem, depicting, in the introduction, dark and somber earth sounds. The first theme—an *Allegro*—appears in about twenty measures, representing the activity, energy, and ambition of the ingenious mind. Later, the trombones and double basses introduce a motive of rather gigantic proportions in which the composer wishes to portray Edison with his mammoth strength and power. Then comes a moment of anxiety—the path of mankind has been illuminated! A lyrical theme is introduced and developed extensively, with the first theme and the ‘Edison Motive’ re-appearing several times and thus bringing the work to a tremendous climax.

In this description Britain identifies at least two main themes, the “allegro theme” and the “lyrical theme,” and an Edison motive. Unlike “Heroic Poem,” where Britain places Lindbergh as a lone hero within a storyline, reacting to nature and humanity, “Light” explores Edison himself, both as a genius and as a strong, powerful individual.

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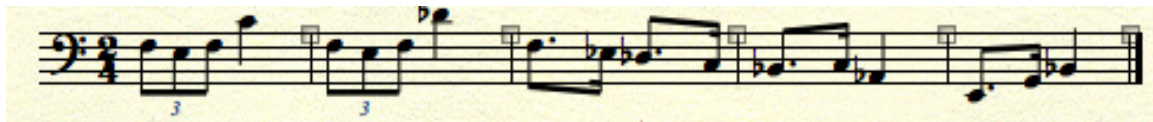
<sup>74</sup> In Britain’s program notes for the concert she uses many of the same terms that are included in the Simone quote such as “colossal man” and “illuminated the path of mankind.” In reality Britain probably replaced some of Simone’s words with her own.

<sup>75</sup> Britain, *Composer’s Corner*, 41. Italics are in the original text.

<sup>76</sup> Bailey and Bailey, 31.

As the 8 minute, through-composed, tone poem commences there is a sense that the world is in darkness. Opening with bass, double bassoon, and harp in very slow harmonic rhythm gives the listener a sense of being stationary. As the opening material enters *pianississimo* it seems like we hear only the atmosphere. The material, however, will not be limited to the introduction; it will reappear throughout the piece.

The stillness of the opening is important. Characterized by sustained half and whole notes, there is little sense of motion until m. 34. This adds to a sense of darkness, the world before Edison's invention. At this point there is much more activity. Marked "poco agitato" chromatic passages allude to the time of productivity that is coming. Britain lists the Allegro theme as entering in m. 20 in her program notes but in the score the first allegro does not appear until m. 55. The musical material present in m. 20 is a development of the opening material. It could be that Britain expanded the opening after this performance. She describes the allegro theme as representing the activity, energy, and ambition of the ingenious mind. This is characterized in the music by the sudden inclusion of dotted rhythms and triplet figures. The theme is passed between horns and strings/woodwinds, creating forward motion for the first time in the piece.

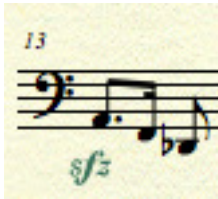


Musical Example 3.5 Allegro Theme

In addition to representing Edison's thoughts, Britain evokes the illumination process in this section. The opening seems dark, with a lack of motion and timbral variety. By this point in the composition Britain has introduced light before the discovery moment has occurred. Edison's intellectual creativity brings light to the music, through increased rhythm motion, thematic diversity and varied orchestration.

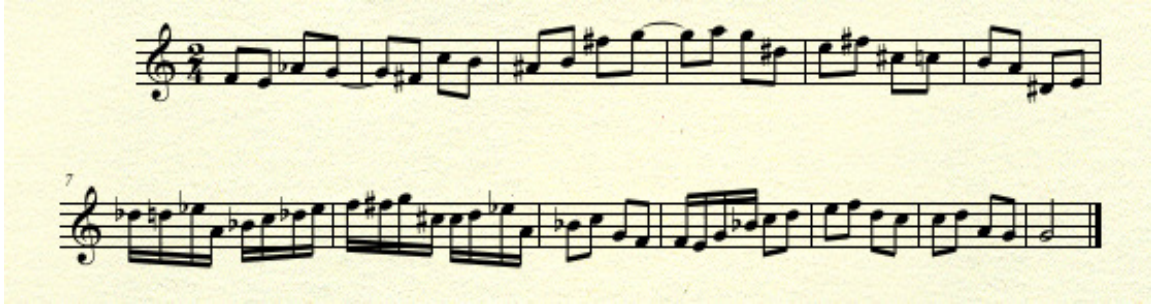
Britain seeks to portray Edison as a strong, powerful man as well as an intellectual. The "Edison motive" that Britain introduces first appears in the trombones in m. 149. The motive is three notes, in a falling motion marked with a *sforzando*. After

introducing the motive, the music accelerates and the motive is played by the horns, trumpets, and trombones. The passage is marked *maestoso*, which interestingly Britain uses in each of her hero pieces, especially when she wants to designate an important theme or idea. Britain provides a picture of a balanced hero here.



Musical Example 3.6 Edison Motive

After the introduction of the Edison motive winds and brass pass the motive back and forth and the music builds in intensity. By m. 173 the woodwinds join forces, play an ascending melody that builds tension until they reach a “molto ritardando” culminating in a grand pause in m. 179. The world is illuminated. Not unlike the opening, the lighted world is characterized by long sustained chords. Rather than the ominous dark tones of the opening, the new world is vibrant with the colorful sounds of horns and strings. After four measures, a solo violin plays a lyrical theme, representing an illuminated world. The English horn joins in a dialogue with the violin and flutes, and clarinets begin to color the soundworld with thirty-second note scalar passages. The remainder of the piece explores the relationship between the lyrical theme and the Edison motive through a variety of timbral combinations. It is as if Edison is moving through the newly illuminated world discovering aspects of the lyrical theme with each development. As Britain describes it, the piece builds in tension before finding climactic resolve in the grandiose ending.



Musical Example 3.7 Lyrical Theme Played by the Violin

In many ways “Light” shows similarities to “Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson” and “Heroic Poem.” “Light” also has a number of distinct themes, as did “Heroic Poem,” but the themes are not treated in the same way. They are not used as part of a plot. While there is an event separating the two halves of “Light,” the moment when the world becomes illuminated, there is not the same sense of movement through time. By using through-composed form in “Heroic Poem,” Britain is able to move the hero through his trans-Atlantic flight. While “Light” is still through-composed, it behaves differently than heroic poem, uses more motives and less nature-like effects. It is almost as if one is exploring two worlds, one before light and one after light. In this way it is reminiscent of “Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson.” In the portrait the theme is altered by perspective, while in “Light” the themes are altered by discovery.

Each of the three pieces treats its thematic and programmatic material in a distinctive manner, which is reasonable, given that each hero was notable for different accomplishments. “Musical Portrait” focuses on an individual personality, “Heroic Poem” on an individual on a journey, and “Light” on an individual making a discovery.

It is impossible to know what prompted Radie Britain to write these particular pieces, as she leaves no explanations of their inspiration in her papers. One cannot deny the promotional possibilities for choosing each of these topics. To call Britain an opportunist may be unfair, but she was a savvy businesswoman. In the 1940s Jefferson’s bicentennial birthday celebrations would have been good reason to make him the center of the composition, especially a composition that had won Britain an audience at the White House. In 1927, the U.S. copyright office recorded three hundred applications for

Lindbergh songs and by 1929 Lindbergh was still a favorite topic in American discourse.<sup>77</sup> Thomas Edison died in 1931, three years before Britain finished the composition, “Light.” Britain enjoyed writing about current events and continued to do so throughout her career.<sup>78</sup> These hero compositions are examples of this tendency in her work, which happened to be extremely marketable during the Great Depression. The FMP enjoyed programming patriotic works and ones with such themes fared well. Whether Britain composed the pieces to be marketable or because taking inspiration from current events was part of her compositional process is not known, but I sense that for Britain the two were not mutually exclusive.

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<sup>77</sup> Kim Kowalke “Music in the Air: Lindbergh’s Historic Flight Inspired a Myriad of Musical Tributes.” <http://www.americancomposers.org/lindberghmusic.htm> (Accessed March 19 2012).

<sup>78</sup> In the 1960s Britain composed many space-focused compositions inspired by the recent space race.

## CHAPTER IV

### CONCLUSIONS AND NEW DIRECTIONS

This thesis explores Britain's life and career as a professional composer in a particular time in American music culture. A biographical study and exploratory studies of Britain's music provided new details about Britain's professional life, one aspect of her compositional work, and her involvement with the WPA. In this chapter I will discuss conclusions of this project and explore new directions for Radie Britain research.

Radie Britain's career is an example of musical professionalism that is rare for women in the early twentieth century. In some ways, Britain faced the same issues as other women composers of her time but often her life story provided different opportunities. Many factors contributed to Britain's success in the professional realm, including educational opportunities, institutional support, financial security, and personal ambition.

E.C. and Katie Britain valued education in their household. Because of this, there was no question whether Radie would have an opportunity to go to college. Rather Britain was expected to fulfill any educational goals to which she aspired. Not only did she have a private teacher, she attended finishing school, college, and studied abroad. This educational background was the foundation of her professional success, not only providing her with the skills necessary for composition but needed personal and institutional connections as well.

Women's music clubs provided the first institutional support of Radie Britain. The clubs worked diligently to champion Britain's music and the early awards received from music clubs helped bolster her reputation as a professional. The National League of American Pen Women provided Britain with a variety of opportunities for professional development including compositional prizes, writing, and editing.

Financial security differentiates Britain's story from other American's during this time of history. From her time at the conservatory through her adult life, including during the Great Depression, Britain never had to worry about money. Her parents provided her with financial support until her marriage, where Moeller's career allowed Britain to compose full time without the worry of making a living. This should not be equated with

Britain being ignorant about money. On the contrary, E.C. made sure that his daughter knew how to take of her own income and Britain faithfully invested each composition prize and royalty check she received. While financial security is not an indicator of success, Britain's economic security afforded her the opportunity to compose consistently.<sup>79</sup>

Personal ambition cannot be discounted when considering Britain's success as a composer. In 1925 Britain took a trip to visit the home of Edvard Grieg, one of her acknowledged influences. She recounts the experience in her autobiography:

At the highest point I sat down to become a part of God's world, drinking in the panoramic view. I was transfixed in meditation. I asked: 'What is my aim? How can I make my greatest contribution?' After moments of silence, an inner voice directed me. 'Work—work. Dedicate yourself to become one of the greatest women composers.' I slowly rose in a trance. God had spoken. I would obey.<sup>80</sup>

Britain references the vow she made at Grieg's house numerous times in her writings. To Britain, she had a responsibility to become a great composer. While she saw it as something of a destiny, she knew it was a destiny she would have to work for. Britain constantly sought new subjects, read composition textbooks, met conductors, was awarded commissions, entered composition contests, and most important, wrote music well past the age of eighty.

The Federal Music Project, while only one facet of Britain's career, provided a specific outlet for her work. Britain's work appealed to Nikolai Sokoloff and the WPA for a number of reasons. She was a marketer's dream. From the outset they could bill her as being plucked from obscurity on the ranch, riding her snow-white cow pony and dreaming of being a composer.<sup>81</sup> She also composed works that addressed the purpose of the FMP. Beginning in 1927 the FMP focused on pieces that were patriotic and that promoted nationalism. With pieces composed about American greats like Thomas

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<sup>79</sup> See Citron. This consistency of career is a marker that Citron references in her chapter, "Professionalism." Many women have been denied the term professional because they did not compose "full-time" over the course of their lives. 82-83.

<sup>80</sup> Britain, 159.

<sup>81</sup> Box 2.325/K71a, Scrapbook #2, Radie Britain Papers, 1914-2007, The Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, The University of Texas Austin. See program for Composers' Forum, May 4, 1936.



Jefferson, Charles Lindbergh, and Thomas Edison, Britain's music aligned closely with the FMP political agenda. A goal of the FMP was to provide opportunities to women composers. In this regard Britain's gender worked to her advantage. Britain's story was also one that many women could identify with: she was a working wife and mother. She made the notion of a woman composer compatible with the American ideal of femininity, at least in promotional literature.

For a project of this scope, a study that considers a few works by Britain is a useful way to explore her compositional output without suggesting comprehensiveness. Britain's three hero pieces were from her Chicago period, a time of significant compositional output, when she won numerous national and international awards, and also appealed to the Federal Music Project. Even this limited focus suggests larger trends within Britain's oeuvre.

The inspiration behind Britain's work can be problematic. Of 280 compositions in the work list, only 22 pieces have titles that do not allude to some extramusical idea. Britain herself explains her compositional process as beginning with a title.<sup>82</sup> But in the three pieces studied the titles have been malleable. While some titles, such as "Heroic Poem" seem to be stable, others like "Musical Portrait of Thomas Jefferson" suggest an extramusical idea that was not premeditated. Name and program changes happen frequently in Britain's works. These changes can be a result of a strategic career move or a change of opinion towards a piece. At times the entire program is removed. With "Prelude to Pygmalion" changing to "Prelude to a Drama" the entire sexual story of the piece is censored. Britain's titles are tantalizing to the researcher. When one hears a name like "Drouth" or "Cosmic Mist Symphony" the inclination is to want to know the story behind the piece. This is one of the appealing aspects of Radie Britain research, but the scholar has to be wary when investigating these pieces. The life of each piece must be carefully examined or simple assumptions can cause a researcher to miss a much larger context for a piece.

In the majority of Britain's writing she notes that the melody is the most important thing to her. When asked how she would best describe her music to someone

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<sup>82</sup> Bailey and Bailey, 19.

she replied, “If you want real good, juicy melodies, something from the heart that the orchestra likes to play and the audience enjoys, you might enjoy my work.” After the title, the melody is the second aspect of the work that materialized for Britain. This process was a spiritual process for Britain and she often referred to the themes as “inspired melodies.” She described the process in the 1988 interview:

I’m very spiritual when it comes to composing. I tune in to something greater than I am, I feel that I am the reed through which the melody is played. It’s never let me down. If I can dismiss all vibrations of this earth and be really quiet, I begin to hear a beautiful melody. And I begin writing it down as fast as I can.<sup>83</sup>

Throughout her writings Britain is clear that her pieces are about melody. As a composer she felt that there was a responsibility to be skilled in orchestration and harmony but her real focus was the melody. Because of this focus, thematic and motivic analysis is useful when approaching her work. Britain tends to begin a piece with a distinctive melody and then develop it in a number of ways. In “Musical Portrait” the theme is left untouched, while contrasting materials provide different perspectives. “Heroic Poem” used a variety of related themes to move through time and explore a narrative. “Light” uses themes to suggest the strong and “ingenious” inventor.<sup>84</sup> Melody is not the only area of interest in Britain’s works but it is crucial to understand the composer’s own starting point and emphasis.

It is interesting to note the similarities between Britain’s career and that of her contemporaries. Her educational path is reminiscent of another composer, Ruth Crawford. Crawford’s place in history was only secured decades after her death. Britain attended the American Conservatory from 1919-1921, while Crawford arrived at the school in Chicago in September 1921.<sup>85</sup> Just missing each other, the women came to the institution with similar intentions. Both women were pianists, and both studied organ and harmony while there. Crawford, like Britain, sought to study with Henoit Levy because of his excellent reputation. Unfortunately both women developed neuritis in their forearms, which may have been a result of the particular playing technique he taught.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid.

<sup>84</sup> Both strong and ingenious are adjectives Britain uses in her notes for the piece.

<sup>85</sup> Judith Tick *Ruth Crawford Seeger: A Composer’s Search for American Music* New York: Oxford University Press, 1997, 27.

Crawford left the conservatory in 1924 before Britain returned in 1926 as an instructor. Both women studied in Europe, spent summers at the MacDowell Colony and had their works performed by WPA orchestras. While Britain's and Crawford's musics are written in starkly different idioms, the two women followed a similar path to becoming successful composers. Since the 1990s Crawford's music and life story have received scholarly attention from musicologist Judith Tick, music theorist Joseph Straus, and many others.<sup>86</sup> Her music is also widely available on CDs and in a MUSA edition. Britain on the other hand is awaiting attention. This may be traceable to Britain's choice of compositional style; while Crawford is valued for her work as both an ultramodernist and a folksong arranger; Britain has had to await new appreciation of her post-romantic style.

Another composer whose career may shed light on Britain's is William Grant Still. Still, (1895-1978) often referred to as the Dean of African American music, studied composition at Oberlin Conservatory, only a few years before Britain started her formal education in Chicago.<sup>87</sup> Like Britain, Still composed in a variety of genres reaching a peak of popularity in the 1930s and 1940s before receding from the public eye. Both composed operas, ballets, symphonies, descriptive music for orchestra, choral music, chamber music, and music for voice and piano; and yet the majority of Still's work remained understudied until the 1990s.<sup>88</sup> Larry Starr compares William Grant Still with other tonal art music composers of the twentieth century, such as Virgil Thomson, Howard Hanson, Roy Harris, and William Schuman, and observes that while the composers enjoyed success during their own lifetimes, their work in the tonal tradition may have caused them to be overlooked by scholars until recently. I would also include Britain in this list, along with many other women composers who have been overlooked in the past. Few would argue against Still's and Crawford's places in scholarly literature even though their music received little attention until after their deaths. Likewise, Britain's oeuvre is deserving of scholarly attention today.

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<sup>86</sup> Joseph Straus *The Music of Ruth Crawford Seeger*, (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

<sup>87</sup> Judith Tick *Music in the USA: A Documentary Companion*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 439-445.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid*, 482-483.

The study of gender in relation to a composer is always a complex issue and the case of Radie Britain is no exception. Britain often prided herself as being a successful woman composer and wrote about the subject. In an essay included in *Composer's Corner* Britain explores the role of women in music and exhorts other women:

Women must rededicate their lives to their art and acquire sufficient technique to release *Imprisoned splendor*, realizing that the soul is a dynamo constantly generating electricity from a magnetic field as vast as the Universe! We must believe in our talent, that spirit-force, hidden and powerful as an atom—for this contains our immortality!<sup>89</sup>

At times it is hard to accept that Britain believes her own words. She exudes confidence in her musical work but not always in her womanhood. Britain avoided disclosing her sex when she was submitting a work to a conductor and she sometimes hid her name as well. She often credits at least part of her success to the fact that her name was not obviously gendered female. Within her writings Britain falls into the trap of many writers defaulting to the male pronoun to describe everything. “He” is always the great composer in her writing. Specific to this project, Britain’s hero is also always male.<sup>90</sup> Today it seems troubling that Britain who set out to be the greatest woman composer, and encouraged other women to compose, employed many of the same strategies and rhetorical devices that have worked against and marginalized women composers.

Britain’s relationships with conductors provide valuable insights into her professional career. Britain did not accept conventional gender roles when it came to professionalism and because of that her compositional career looked very different from other women composers. Thus her absence from history cannot be explained by reference to a set of societal assumptions that hindered many women. This is just one more reason that Britain, and other composers missing from history, must be examined from a number of perspectives. It was not merely her compositional style or her gender that left her “eclipsed” in modern scholarship, but rather some complex combination of these attributes and countless others. It will be important to continue to examine Britain in her

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<sup>89</sup> Radie Britain, *Composer's Corner*, Hollywood, CA: Highland Music Company, 1978, 42.

<sup>90</sup> This may not be a reflection of Britain as much as it is the culture she lived in.

time and context and to expose her music to closer analytical scrutiny to understand her absence from the historical record.

### New Directions

Radie Britain was a successful, professional composer in her own time. She participated in mainstream music culture in the United States: her pieces were performed by the Chicago Symphonic Orchestra; she took third place in the International Hollywood Bowl Competition, she was the first woman to win the Juilliard Publication Prize, she spent two summers as a fellow at the MacDowell Colony and her works were played at the White House on at least one occasion.<sup>91</sup> With a works list that includes pieces for solo voice, piano, choir, string quartet, band, orchestra, chamber ensemble, dramatic music, and opera, Britain's career is simply awaiting scholarly investigation. In this concluding segment I hope to illuminate new directions I see in future Radie Britain scholarship.

A detailed finding aid for the Radie Britain Collection at the Dolph Briscoe Center for American History is one of the first projects that needs to be completed to further Britain scholarship. The large collection spans fifty linear feet but has only a partial finding aid. While this is adequate for locating a big item (i.e. a scrapbook or box of photographs) the entire contents of the collection are scarcely known. The organization and recording of the materials in a finding aid will surely encourage new research on Britain.

Radie Britain's works need to be heard by a larger musical public. Contemporaries with Britain like Ruth Crawford and William Grant Still have had revivals in recent decades, bringing their music to the consciousness of scholars and performers. At the present time there is only one recorded work of Radie Britain's compositions, "Prelude to a Drama" performed by the U.S. Air Force Symphony. The dearth of recordings presents a real handicap for scholars seeking to research her work. Britain's music needs to be programmed and recorded so that it can become accessible to the public.

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<sup>91</sup> There is a reference to Britain having her works played at the White House on several occasions in Britain's notes in the archive. So far I can only find a program for one of these concerts.

Theoretical analysis is possible with Britain's compositions. Many scores are available in local libraries or can be requested through interlibrary loan systems. Thematic and motivic analyses will be important as will harmonic and formal analyses. As these projects become more abundant scholars will have a better starting point from which to study Britain's music. At the current time this thesis is the only scholarly discussion of Britain's music, and it is introductory.

Radie Britain deserves a scholarly biography. While her autobiography is useful, and fairly accurate when compared with materials available in her scrapbooks, it is dangerous for scholars to only have her own writing and small sketches. Also there are many misconceptions about Radie Britain, two of which are corrected in this thesis: the date of the Juilliard Composition Prize and the program performed at the White House. Sources rarely have the correct birth year (1899) noted for the composer. For a scholar currently doing Britain research it is impossible to find correct biographical information without consulting the archive. Even the bio-bibliography has reprinted mis-information.

While this project touches on her involvement with the Works Progress Administration and the Federal Music Project, it only discusses three compositions. A larger study of Britain's involvement with this government project is needed. Britain was one of many women who benefited from New Deal projects. As more women from the period enter the discourse and repertoire the Federal Music Project will be an important site to understand the works and professionalism of women who composed in the early twentieth century.

Britain's compositions explore a number of topics. Within her oeuvre there are pieces dealing with a wide array of concepts important to the field of musicology. There are pieces dealing with current events, such as space exploration. Those interested in place studies will find a deep correlation between Britain, her places and her pieces. Scholars interested in religious studies can explore Britain's blend of Methodism and Eastern religions and their manifestations in her music. Additionally, themes addressed in this thesis could be expanded on, including nationalism, patriotism, and gender studies.

Britain scholarship is only beginning. The life of Radie Britain, her 280 compositions, and four books are awaiting scholarly investigation. By exploring these resources there will not only be a better understanding of this prolific composer but of the

music culture in various parts of the United States throughout the majority of the twentieth century. These are only some directions I anticipate in the future of Britain research. I am excited to see where the field takes Radie Britain, and what we will learn about the woman and her music.

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