Honoring Womanhood: The Creative Works of Elinor Dunsmuir: Minerva Teichert Award Winner 2021

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T HE WEIGHT OF THE DECEMBER RAIN DROPLETS ON AN afternoon in Victoria, British Columbia wasn't quite as heavy as the anticipation I felt towards my callback to the BYU School of Music, less than a month away. My family excursion to Canada was meant to be an escape, yet the familiar fear of rejection had obtained an unwelcome passport into my mind. Little did I know, the inspiration I needed was lying behind the wooden doors of the Craigdarroch Castle, in the life of the underrepresented female composer, Elinor Dunsmuir.

Emily Elinor Dunsmuir (1887–1938) was born to an exceptionally wealthy family in Western Canada during the industrial revolution. Growing up, she and her sisters were regularly immersed in artistic practices, which led to her musical studies in New York City, Dresden, and Leipzig. Throughout her life she composed a myriad of works: two fully orchestrated ballets, an operetta, dozens of art songs, music theatre pieces, solo piano music, and other chamber music, none of which were published until 2018. In 2012, her manuscripts were purchased from Dunsmuir's great-niece by the Craigdarroch Castle Society. Elizabeth Gerow, a soprano from the Victoria Conservatory of Music, published and performed these art songs available now in the public domain.

The text of "Imagination" is based on a poem originally written in Chinese, set by Dunsmuir to a mysterious composition of jazz and pentatonic harmonies. The text speaks of a young girl, hard at work in "her solitary chamber."[1] Her work is halted by the sound of a jade flute, enveloping her in a deep reverie of the sound of a young boy's voice. As she peers through papered windows, the shadow of the orange tree enters and "she imagines that somebody has torn her silken dress."

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1 Dunsmuir, Elinor. "'Imagination.'" *The Life of Elinor Dunsmuir As Seen through Her Music*, edited by Nicholas VanGiesen and Elizabeth Gerow, 2018.

Though the young girl's "work" is not clarified, the end of the text suggests she is a poor textile artisan. Distracted by the jade flute, a symbol of beauty and wealth, she imagines a young boy, suggesting her desire for freedom and status in her society. The tearing of the silk dress is ambiguous; however, assuming her status, the silk dress is not hers, but one she is creating for an individual of higher, wealthier status.

Perhaps Dunsmiur chose to set this text as a statement suggesting the oppression of women throughout world history. Her life as a female composer may have very well felt a "solitary chamber": having a desire to share creative perspective with the world, yet being confined by the limitations of a male-dominated society. She may have felt that her musical compositions provided her only escape, yet they went completely unrecognized at the time.

Some of the greatest creative works by women are hidden from the narrow eyes of the world. And many will never be seen. This does not undermine their quality and value. The works of Canadian Elinor Dunsmuir serve as a representation of women throughout the world, published and unpublished, whose creative works should be honored, discovered, and shared.

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Watch the Performance:

https://youtu.be/HyO4TfvlcOU