Pioneering Spirit: Maud MacCarthy
Mysticism, Music and Modernity

An exhibition curated by the Enchanted Modernities Leverhulme Trust International Network at the Borthwick Institute for Archives and online

7 February – 9 May 2014

http://hoaportal.york.ac.uk/hoaportal/pioneering-spirit.jsp
Introduction

This exhibition explores the extraordinary life and career of Maud MacCarthy (1882–1967). The material on display here highlights her extensive cultural networks in Britain and India in the first part of the twentieth century. MacCarthy’s active life as a professional violinist, writer on music and the visual arts, social campaigner and committed mystic is highlighted through a selection of material from the MacCarthy/Foulds Family Papers archive collection held at the Borthwick Institute for Archives at the University of York.

When the collection arrived at the Borthwick Institute in 2008, few could have imagined the stories it contained: a little girl so enchanting upon the violin that she played before queens and prime ministers; a young woman who, despite her public profile, steadfastly rejected the social, political and religious norms of her day; a tireless artistic innovator in the modernist heyday of artistic experimentation; an intrepid traveller and champion of international co-operation; a devotee of mystical movements following a determined quest for spiritual enlightenment in the modern world. Maud MacCarthy, pioneering spirit that she was, managed to be all of these.

Despite the existence of this archive, MacCarthy’s story has gone more or less untold until now. Why? At the end of her life, in the freer atmosphere of the 1960s, the world had almost caught up with MacCarthy. By then, her fascination with Eastern spirituality would barely have raised an eyebrow, her objections to nationalism and imperialism would have been readily understood, and even her commitment to using music as a healing agent, labelled as quackery in the 1930s, had gone mainstream (in the form of music therapy). Indeed, for much of her life, MacCarthy was well ahead of her times. She was one of the first Western scholars and performers of Indian music, for example, and she developed community arts projects in the poorest parts of London before it had occurred to many others to use the arts in this way.

This archive of personal documents, photographs, newspaper articles, concert pamphlets and published writings sheds light on the astonishing breadth and depth of Maud MacCarthy’s activities in Britain and India.

An extended essay on Maud MacCarthy and more information about the archive is available on the digital exhibition website: http://hoaportal.york.ac.uk/hoaportal/pioneering-spirit
Love & Life

Maud MacCarthy’s early childhood was every bit as cosmopolitan as her later life. Her prodigious artistic talents, too, showed themselves at a young age. Born in Ireland, she lived in Sydney, Australia before moving to London at the tender age of nine to enrol at the Royal College of Music. She quickly went on to build a remarkable career as a child prodigy on the violin. Early on she caught the eye of Prime Minister William Gladstone. Her talents even attracted the patronage of royalty: in 1895 she played for Queen Victoria who gave her a brooch as thanks. She went on to perform in concert halls around the world. At the age of 23, however, MacCarthy was forced to retire from concert performance due to the onset of neuritis. This painful physical illness, and its treatment, was to trouble her throughout her later life and work. The gap which concert performance left in MacCarthy’s life was filled by dedication to the mystical movement of Theosophy. MacCarthy joined the Theosophical Society in 1900, and in 1911 she married the Theosophical writer William Mann with whom she had a daughter, Joan. The union was not to last and in 1915 Maud met the cellist and composer John Foulds, also a Theosophist, with whom she began a passionate love affair. Maud lived with John in London through the 1920s despite not marrying him until 1932, a risky arrangement in the context of the early twentieth century’s sexual politics. Maud and John had two children: John Patrick and Marybride. The family moved permanently to India in 1934, and following Foulds’s death in 1939, Maud married Bill Coote, a man with remarkable mystical powers who had worked alongside the family in London in the 1930s.

The Theosophical Society

Founded in 1875 in New York City, the Theosophical Society came to embrace the study of spiritualism, occultism, Eastern religions and esoteric Christianity. Helena Blavatsky’s writings, *Isis Unveiled* (1877) and later *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), became foundational, shaping the Society’s uniquely syncretic and inclusive outlook. In the first twenty years the Society grew across the globe, establishing important centres in India, Europe and the United States. England became an especially important site, as from 1887 Blavatsky resided in London. It was during that time that she began an “esoteric” section of the Theosophical Society dedicated to studying occult practices with her private students.

The problematic side of the organization’s syncretism became apparent after Blavatsky’s death in 1891, with the next twenty-five years riven by internecine conflict, scandal and schism. One of the central figures in this period was the social-reformer-turned-Theosophist Annie Besant, who was one of Blavatsky’s private students and became President of the Society in 1907. It was through friendship with Besant that Maud came to Theosophy, joining the Theosophical Society in 1900, and entering the Esoteric Section in 1905. Maud worked on behalf of the Society in many capacities before the First World War, including lecturing on Indian music, writing for its journals, and organizing weekly musical services at its London headquarters. In this last endeavour she collaborated with the composer John Foulds, whom she would later marry. The two also began a series of “Theosophical Experiments in Music”, communicating with suprahuman entities through music and beginning to instruct others how to do so.

Maud left the Theosophical Society sometime around the end of the First World War. The possible reasons for this can be read as a distillation of the challenges that institutional Theosophy faced in the early twentieth century. Maud’s claim to occult agency was a direct challenge to the authority of Theosophical leaders who had worked to concretize Theosophical belief, and it led to her expulsion from the Esoteric Section. At the same time her growing affair with John Foulds represented the kind of scandal that the Society could not afford.
For Maud MacCarthy, as for many Theosophists, the Great War was a world conflict on the astral as well as the physical plane, something humanity would undergo in order to achieve a higher stage of evolution. She and Foulds enshrined this vision in a colossal commemorative oratorio entitled A World Requiem (1918–20), subtitled “a tribute to the memory of the Dead – a message of consolation to the bereaved of all nations”. At a time when many were frustrated by a perceived lack of answers from “official” sources, MacCarthy and Foulds offered an interpretation of the war that for some, at least, was meaningful. Their stated aim was to “produce a work which might belong to many nations and creeds so that amidst the clash and conflict of the races, of the religions, and of the factions; some expression might be found for the indestructible spiritual unity of mankind”. In the closing movements they sought “to typify the joy underlying all creation, even death, and in a series of visions (described by tenor and soprano), to embody the mystic conception of life continuous beyond the earthly sphere”.

Maud’s main contribution to the Requiem was to assemble the text, combining passages of the Old and New Testaments with lines from Bunyan’s The Pilgrim’s Progress and the fifteenth-century mystic Indian poet Kabir. More than once she smoothed the transitions with verses of her own. The result was deeply unconventional theologically, which probably explains why the original intention to perform the Requiem in “a national cathedral” never came to fruition.

Foulds set MacCarthy’s text to music, sometimes doing so, according to Maud herself, “in a psychically objective way”, by listening “clairaudiently” and notating what was heard as accurately as possible. The house seemed “shaken”, she recalled, “by this heavenly music, and angelic choirs sang, and angelic musicians played to us”; Foulds even invented a new instrument – a sistrum – in order to imitate the sounds reaching them from beyond the veil.

Foulds’s original intention was to dedicate the score of A World Requiem to the Y.M.C.A., but after losing his position with the Association early in 1923 (see next section) he and MacCarthy garnered support from the British Legion, and particularly its president Earl Haig. The Legion adopted the work for high-profile fundraising performances held at the Royal Albert Hall on Armistice Night, beginning in 1923. MacCarthy worked tirelessly to organize these events – the first of the British Legion’s “Festivals of Remembrance”, a term she claimed to have invented herself – and even redoubled her efforts when in early 1925 the British establishment’s enthusiasm for their World Requiem began to cool. This was ostensibly for financial, although probably also for doctrinal reasons, and in the face of resistance from church musicians to such an unconventional score rapidly becoming ritualized as the official national/imperial commemorative work of the war. By 1927 A World Requiem had been officially “forgotten”, to MacCarthy’s intense frustration, and was replaced on Armistice Night by community singing for ex-servicemen followed by a torchlit procession to the Cenotaph. John’s ultimate dedication of his score to Maud seems a fitting reminder of her constant but fruitless efforts to obtain performances over the ensuing decades.
Maud MacCarthy’s interests in the arts extended far beyond her professional pursuits as a violinist and writer on music. She was an active participant in a number of Theosophical and spiritual artistic networks, and was a founder-member of the Theosophical Art-Circle, as well as founder and President of the Brotherhood of Arts, Crafts and Industries. Through her work in these organizations, as well as her many published articles and lectures, MacCarthy promoted the idea of the unity of all the arts and the co-operation of different kinds of artists. These organizations endeavoured to bring together musicians, painters, writers and craft workers who were committed to exploring the connections between the spiritual and the arts. For MacCarthy, her concept of the unity of the arts also expanded across national boundaries and she called for a “world-wide exchange of art powers”, criticizing what she saw as the insularity of artistic practice in Britain and the “savage exclusiveness to national ideals”.

Inspired by her knowledge of Theosophical texts, and the writings of Theosophical President Annie Besant in particular, MacCarthy developed theories about an “ideal” kind of art. The ultimate purpose of art was, she claimed, to reflect the divine in man. She was also heavily inspired by the Arts & Crafts and Aesthetic movements of the nineteenth century, particularly the writings of John Ruskin and Walter Pater. Her hope was to inspire a new generation of artists who would reject materialism and search instead for the “revival of the mysteries in the Arts and Crafts” in order to create an art of “cosmic ideals” for the new age of the twentieth century.

Foulds was classified as unfit for combat when conscription came in, and during the latter years of the war, he and MacCarthy became involved with the Young Men’s Christian Association. A predominantly middle-class voluntary organization, the Y.M.C.A. was crucial to the allied war effort, providing pastoral and practical support for troops both on the front lines and home on leave. With their Theosophical background, MacCarthy and Foulds were probably drawn to the Association’s internationalist and ecumenical outlook, and when a Y.M.C.A. social club was established under the auspices of Lena Ashwell in a former high-society nightclub – Ciro’s Club, north of Leicester Square, London (above) – Foulds was appointed Musical Director.

Ciro’s was the first mixed Y.M.C.A. venue, offering servicemen and their female friends respectable alcohol-free refreshment and entertainment.
Together MacCarthy and Foulds organized concerts at Ciro’s of sacred and quasi-sacred music on a Sunday evening, when soldiers were thought most likely to fall prey to immoral temptations and London’s criminals. Foulds arranged often large-scale orchestral and vocal works for a small group of musicians, usually comprising a single voice, piano, two violins (including MacCarthy), cello and organ (often both played by Foulds himself). Alongside meditative and religious music mainly of the nineteenth century were heard works by Foulds and MacCarthy themselves, including MacCarthy’s Songs of England Today, comprising “England, My Country”, “Home”, and “Clarion Call”. As well as “request” programmes, “special” programmes were offered on dedicated themes, including: Wagner, the spirituality of scores such as Parsifal and Tannhäuser transcending concerns over national prejudice; Gounod, “the Great French Composer”; Franco-British and French music; American music; Easter music; and Christmas music, with carol-singing for the audience. On at least three occasions MacCarthy played alongside another solo violinist in Bach’s Double Concerto. Each concert concluded in the manner of a service, with a hymn followed by an address.

By mid August 1918, 62 such concerts had been presented under Foulds’s directorship, and according to MacCarthy, such was their popularity that she and Foulds were also invited to give Sunday evening performances at Central Y.M.C.A., Tottenham Court Road. On 28 September 1918, in recognition of their success, Foulds was appointed Musical Director of the National Council of Y.M.C.A.s for London, a post he held until March 1923.

Following the disappointment of having the Festival of Remembrance wrested from them by the British Legion, MacCarthy and Foulds set about a new project. MacCarthy wanted to establish a settlement house along the lines of Kingsley Hall (a radical community centre in the East End of London) for the encouragement of artistic and spiritual activities in the local community. She originally wanted to open this settlement in the slums of East London, but after several attempts to buy a suitable property failed, she and Foulds set up Grove End in Chiswick, also referred to as Tadema House and Everyone’s Concern. Grove End acted in part as a guest house: paying visitors could come merely for “complete isolation and quiet”. But MacCarthy also encouraged Londoners to frequent the establishment to take part, for
example, in the Puppet Festival Theatre Club, or to attend cookery classes. Everyone’s Concern was a forum to promote the artistic, social and mystical ideas that MacCarthy had developed in the preceding decade, including the promotion of Indian arts. Grove End was also to be a quasi-religious space, as a sketch of the proposed “peace room”, which features in the exhibition, shows. In addition, MacCarthy used Grove End for what she termed “phonotherapy”, an early (and mystical) version of music therapy through which patients were healed by the power of sound vibrations alone. Described in a promotional flyer as “a ‘bath’ of sound” and as “analogous to sun or sea-bathing”, the healing took place as MacCarthy sang and performed on musical instruments. However, despite recording positive feedback from those she apparently healed, Maud’s phonotherapy project met with scorn from some mainstream commentators. In particular, an article in *John Bull* in 1933 ridiculed Maud for her esoteric interests and attempted to out her as a charlatan and a fraud.

Indian Music &
John Foulds’s Death

In the late 1910s Maud had convalesced at Theosophical Headquarters in Adyar, and began to study Indian classical music. Upon her return to England she lectured and published widely on the topic providing her own instrumental and vocal illustrations. These lectures established her as one of the most important authorities on Indian music in England at the time, and proved influential for composers as varied as Granville Bantock and Gustav Holst. Later, in 1935, with few opportunities for employment in Europe, Foulds and Maud moved to India where he became Director of European Music for All-India Radio. This led him to experiment compositionally with ensembles consisting of both European and Indian instruments. Foulds (pictured above, right) died tragically in 1939 from cholera, and most, if not all, of his manuscripts from this time have been lost.
Later Life in India

After controversial press about Grove End it became clear that MacCarthy’s and Fould’s mystical interests were irreconcilably out of step with mainstream British culture. A year later the family moved to India, abandoning the Grove End project for good. The move was inspired in part, however, by the mystical powers of Bill Coote, whom MacCarthy and Foulds had first met at Kingsley Hall. Believing him to have great mystical potential, Maud wanted to take Coote to India to work with higher spiritual initiates. Her mystical work with Coote is detailed in two books, *The Boy and the Brothers* (1959) and *Towards the Mysteries* (1968). MacCarthy remained in India for over twenty years, returning to England only in old age. She wrote prolifically about Indian arts and on mystical matters under the name Tandra Devi during the 1930s and 1940s. She was also active as a poet. Her publications from this time were often illustrated with drawings by her son John Patrick, some of which are displayed here. Although she did not continue to practise phonotherapy in India, MacCarthy felt strongly enough about her harsh treatment at the hands of John Bull to write an extended defence of her healing credentials, which was published in the *Sunday Statesman* in 1937. She had bigger projects in mind, though. In addition to her work with Coote, she founded an ashram and took on advanced mystical status under yet another new name: Swami Omananda Puri. As a “Swami”, she had not only attained the highest mystical rank in the Hindu ashram system, but was the first woman ever to do so.

Acknowledgements

This exhibition and accompanying website have been made possible through the Leverhulme Trust International Network Grant for *Enchanted Modernities: Theosophy, Modernism and the Arts, c. 1875-1960*. The exhibition has been co-curated by the Network Partners Prof. Rachel Cowgill (Cardiff University), Dr James Mansell (University of Nottingham), Dr Christopher Scheer (Utah State University) and Dr Sarah Victoria Turner (The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art), and Network Facilitator Dr Katie Tyreman (University of York) with the assistance of the Borthwick Institute for Archives team – Amanda Jones, Catherine Dand and Alison Fairburn – and the University’s Digital Library Team, led by Julie Allinson.

Thanks also go to the British Library; Cadbury Research Library, Special Collection, University of Birmingham; Edinburgh University Library; Y.M.C.A.; Theosophical Publishing House; Chandos Records; and Altarus Records. These organizations have loaned and/or given the permission for display of archival photographs, musical scores and music to the exhibition.
Cover Image: Photograph of Maud MacCarthy with a musical instrument [probably a saraswati veena], taken from a pamphlet entitled Miss Maud MacCarthy (Mrs John Foulds) (MCF 5/2/3/1 (5))