
VIOLET GORDON WOODHOUSE

Summary of Personal Life

Violet was born on the 23rd April 1871 to James Eglinton Gwynne and Mary (May) Earle. Violet spent her early years at Folkington Manor, on the outskirts of Polegate, with her brothers and sisters. Violet's talent for music was noticed at a young age, and she soon became a proficient musician; specializing in reviving Elizabethan music through the clavichord and harpsicord, Violet would later make recordings of these instruments for the BBC and HMV. For all of Violet's musical achievements, her personal life has always drawn a lot of attention, from her proposed marriage with Lord Gage that was called off, her platonic marriage with Gordon Woodhouse, the multiple women who became attached to her, and her infamous *ménage à cinq*.

Early Life and education

Violet was born in 1871 to James and May Gwynne, she spent many of her early years between Folkington Manor, Polegate, and the family's house in Harley Street, London. In her early years Violet was surrounded by the up-and-coming musicians of the day, and was often taken to concerts and operas by her mother May¹. Violet was tutored by her mother on the piano, and her talents were noticed early on when she had her first audition at the age of 7, and was accepted into tuition. Even by this early age it was clear that Violet was different to her brothers and sisters and was doted upon by their mother May, and exempt from the violent temper of her father James².

Violet wished to become a professional musician, something that her father would not allow her to do, for it was beneath their rank in society for Violet to be performing publicly as a single woman. Therefore, the only solution was marriage. A suitable match was found in 1893 with Lord Gage, who lived relatively close by at Firlie Manor. However, this match was supposedly called off because Violet was so horrified when her mother explained to her what marriage entailed, and about 'the birds and the bees'³.

¹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 18

² Douglas-Home, 1996, 14

³ Douglas- Home, 2004

Two years after this, Violet attended a party hosted by her brother Rupert. Here she met one of his university friends (John) Gordon Woodhouse. Gordon and Violet married soon after on the 30th July 1895, at St Andrew's Church, Wells Street in London.

Personal History

Violet, Gordon, and her *ménage à cinq*

Violet's personal life managed to cause scandal when she was alive and still manages to today; The Huffington Post included Violet in a list of *The 7 Sexiest Seductresses of all Time*, here her personal life is ranked in the company of Catherine the Great, Marilyn Munroe and Cleopatra!⁴

Violet and Gordon's marriage was not conventional, it was platonic and a means by which Violet could break free from her father's control, and progress her musical career. Gordon is often seen as being happy to play a supporting role to Violet and her ambitions, he was content to see her flourish and indulge her every whim⁵.

Soon after her marriage to Gordon the pair moved to London, and Violet got Gordon to officially change his name to (John) Gordon Gordon-Woodhouse, so that she could call herself Mrs Violet Gordon-Woodhouse. Around this time they also took on the leasehold for Wootton Manor, East Sussex, from Violet's father, this served as a retreat for Gordon from the hustle and bustle of London⁶.

Gordon and Violet's marriage did not remain just the two of them for long. In 1899 the Hon. William Reginald Shute Barrington fell in love with Violet and moved into the marital home⁷. Bill, as he was known, was very handsome and one of the most eligible bachelors in the country when he fell for Violet⁸. The arrangement started discreetly with Bill visiting Gordon and Violet at Wootton, but it soon became obvious that the trio, especially Bill and Violet, were inseparable. At the turn of the century, Gordon and Violet moved houses, both in the countryside and London; Southover House, near Lewes; and 9 Park Place, just off St James⁹. In 1901 Bill left the militia, his 6 year enlistment was up, and he moved in with Gordon and Violet where he took on the gardens at Southover as his project- Violet's relationship with Bill was now obvious to her own family and the wider public¹⁰.

⁴ Droesch, 2004

⁵ Douglas-Home, 1996, 33; 41

⁶ Douglas-Home, 1996, 40

⁷ Douglas-Home, 2004

⁸ Douglas-Home, 1996, 85-6

⁹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 54;61

¹⁰ Douglas-Home, 1996, 66-7

Max Labouchère soon joined the household. He was a barrister who knew Violet's brother Rupert. Max was sophisticated, intelligent and witty, enjoyed the 'unfashionable' Mozart, and was able to educate Violet in all things except music¹¹. To complete the *ménage à cinq* was the Hon. Dennis Tollemache, he was a tall, handsome 17 year old cavalry officer, who had first seen Violet play at the age of 8, and had been in love with her ever since¹².

The infamous *ménage a cinq* was formed. However, it was not just men who seemed to be drawn to Violet throughout her life but women too. A string of women appeared in Violet's life and seemed to become utterly devoted to her. Adelina Granz accompanied Violet and Gordon on their honeymoon and was referred to as 'that woman' by Bill and Gordon¹³. Ethel Smyth, who gave Violet a copy of the infamous Classical lesbian poet Sappho; Ethel herself was legendary for her dalliances with Queen Victoria's lady in waiting and the exiled French Empress Eugénie¹⁴. There was also Marguerite Radclyffe Hall, the first person to publish an overtly lesbian novel in English, specialized in tempting wives away from their husbands, and dedicated her book of poetry *The Forgotten Island* to Violet¹⁵. The extent of Violet's relationship to these women is disputed, some believe there must have been a sexual element, but ultimately it is unknown¹⁶.

Violet's Early Musical Career

While Violet would never become a true professional musician, she quickly became recognised for her talent and ranked alongside many of the best professional keyboardists of her day; the Italian composer, pianist, conductor and much sought after teacher Ferruccio Busoni described Violet as '*one of the greatest living keyboard artists*'¹⁷. Initially, Violet was given lessons by Oscar Beringer and continued these lessons into her married life. Her influences were traditional of the day, Brahms, Chopin, Mendelssohn, Beethoven, and Tchaikovsky but she also played the modern Fauré and the currently unfashionable Mozart¹⁸.

In 1896, Violet first went to a concert given by Arnold Dolmetsch, a French musician and instrument maker who had written about his revival of 16th and 17th Century music. Violet was so taken by him that she began lessons with Dolmetsch, and soon became proficient at the harpsichord,

¹¹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 79-80

¹² Douglas-Home, 1996, 83

¹³ Douglas-Home, 1996, 75

¹⁴ Douglas-Home, 1996, 106-8

¹⁵ Douglas-Home, 1996, 137-8

¹⁶ Richard Dellamora states in his book about Radclyffe Hall that her dalliance with Violet was likely to be sexual, as the book her dedicated to her 'charts the trajectory of an affair' (Dellamora, 2011, 27-29). While Violet's official biographer Douglas-Home says that the extent of the friendship between the two woman is unknown (Douglas-Home, 1996, 138).

¹⁷ Douglas-Home, 1996, 71; 74

¹⁸ Douglas-Home, 1996, 43-4

clavichord, virginals and spinet. This also extended her repertoire to include Corelli, Domenico, Scarlatti, John Dowland, Purcell, Matthew Locke and Bach¹⁹.

Around the turn of the century Violet separated from Dolmetsch, and fell under the influence of her new teacher Agustín Rubio, whom she had met in 1898, and became like a father figure to Violet. Under Rubio Violet would concentrate on her phrasing and the feeling of the music, he also introduced Spanish influences into her repertoire, and during this time Violet mixed with many Spanish artists²⁰.

While Violet was giving some public performances, she also gave a lot of private soirees in her house, and scandalously for the strictly Christian society at the time, she introduced her Sunday concerts where she'd invite many of her foreign musical friends²¹. Audiences at these soirees at the time included: the American violinist Nettie Carpenter; the Spanish violinist, composer and conductor Fernández Arbós; Pablo de Sarasate, the Spanish violinist and composer; the French singer Georges Guétary; the sculptor Auguste Rodin; playwright Bernard Shaw; and her teacher Rubio²².

Around 1911 there was an English folk-song revival starting which captured Violet's imagination. This revival was kick-started by the composer Ralph Vaughan Williams who published a book on English folk song, and had collaborated with Cecil Sharp and George Butterworth to catalogue these songs. This appealed particularly to Violet as she had spent much of her formative years growing up in the rural Sussex countryside²³. Vaughn Williams and Violet were finally introduced by Cecil Sharp, and they collaborated on a program for a concert in 1913 in Stratford which featured Violet on the harpsichord playing folk songs arranged by Sharp, Violet played an early English piece on the Virginal, and Vaughn Williams, even though he hated the harpsichord arranged a *Folk Song Fantasia* for Violet with a flute²⁴.

World War One

Violet's life up until the First World War was in many ways very insular. She lived with her men, cocooned away from the public disapproval of her private life, with her every whim catered for by her devotees, and a flourishing amateur music career that she was able to dictate, free from the constraints of being a professional musician. The War changed Violet's life forever.

Musical institutions were initially closed. Violet was left at home with Gordon who was deemed unfit for active service²⁵. Dennis, as professional soldier was called up and served on the front line. He fought in the Somme, an experience he never talked about later, where he was injured and his battalion

¹⁹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 43-5

²⁰ Douglas-Home, 1996, 69-70

²¹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 73

²² Douglas-Home, 1996, 90

²³ Douglas-Home, 1996, 120-1

²⁴ Douglas-Home, 1996, 122

²⁵ Douglas-Home, 1996, 127

lost 800 out of 1000 men²⁶. Dennis was then later involved in the Battle of the Dunes where he was captured, but it was initially reported that he had died²⁷.

Bill was called up as a reservist and sent to the Persian Gulf in 1915, and onto Basra in 1916, where he contracted dysentery²⁸. Bill then went on to India where he stayed until the end of the war, here he met a potential wife but ultimately was unable to leave Violet²⁹.

Max, at 41, volunteered in the Oxford and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry with Bill initially, but was soon called up to the front line³⁰. Max survived Passchendaele, was promoted to Major, and in January 1918 saw Violet for the last time when he was granted two weeks of leave. When back on the front line he wrote to Violet:

'Beloved, the beautiful thought of us being together again at Armscote seems rather doubtful just now, yet I pray it be so, all my love is with you, Darling Tookees and Bill and Gordon. I have lost everything except what I stand on'³¹

On 31 March Max was recommended a DSO for gallantry, but on the 4th April he was badly wounded, lost his leg and was taken prisoner. Max died on the 20th April 1918 in a German field hospital of his wounds³².

Roland, Violet's brother, joined up with the Queen's (East Sussex) Regiment. He fought in the Battle of the Somme and was awarded a DSO for gallantry for his part in leading a daylight raid, however he was wounded in August 1917 and returned home a broken man³³.

During the War, Violet's dad also dies. His will had been kept a secret and further divided the family. The oldest sons Reginald and Neville were both disinherited and everything was left to Rupert and then Roland. Violet expected to receive something but was also left out of the will, which forced her and Gordon to move to a cheaper house in Ovington Square, London³⁴.

Apart from the emotional strain that Violet must have felt through the war years, she was also moved by the war poetry of Rupert Brooke among others, and played at Isidore de Lara's early War Emergency Concerts³⁵. Violet also continued her evening and Sunday soirées, which became increasingly

²⁶ Douglas-Home, 1996, 140-2

²⁷ Douglas-Home, 1996, 153

²⁸ Douglas-Home, 1996, 142

²⁹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 175

³⁰ Douglas-Home, 1996, 130

³¹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 165

³² Douglas-Home, 1996, 165

³³ Douglas-Home, 1996, 151

³⁴ Douglas-Home, 1996, 131-4

³⁵ Douglas-Home, 1996, 135-6

crowded with officers that were on leave and bereaved relatives³⁶. Violet came into contact during this time many people that would shape her world view, and many influential artists of the day came to her concerts, among them: Osbert Sitwell, TS Elliot, Bernard Van Dieran, WH Davies, Wilfred Owen, Siegfried Sassoon, Aldous Huxley, Arthur Waley, Ezra Pound, Robert Graves and Robert Nichols³⁷.

Post War Years

Violet's post war years saw a marked difference to what life had been like before the war. Violet had lost people that she loved and others, like Dennis, had been scared by what they had seen, money was now very tight, having been left out of her father's will, and with Bill's dalliance in India it seemed like her perfect idyll had been rocked. It was at this point in Violet's career that she was forced to take on Ibbes & Tillett as her agents in an attempt to earn some money, this would be the closest that Violet got to becoming a professional musician and she was soon snapped up to play in private homes³⁸.

Artists soon came back to London and the art scene was once more revived. The Russian art critic and founder of the *Ballets Russes*, Diaghilev returned to London, and in doing so also introduced Violet to Pablo Picasso³⁹. It was at this time as well that Violet first played the Clavichord in public⁴⁰.

In July 1920 Violet made history by being the first person to ever record the harpsichord, and she signed a four year contract with the Gramophone Company to record Bach, Scarletti, Couperin, and early English folk dances for £400 a year⁴¹. The company put on a launch party for her in the Piccadilly Hotel, and the Daily mail wrote of her performance:

*'Those who have heard Mrs Woodhouse in the flesh have heard one who is well-nigh incomparable as an exponent of old keyboard music; and those who were privileged to hear those reproductions of her playing are unlikely to forget the occasion easily'*⁴²

Indeed, Violet met TE Lawrence (Lawrence of Arabia) some years later, and it was said that when he had been posted to the North-West Frontier of India in 1926, he had taken some of Violet's recordings with him to listen to⁴³. These recordings still survive today, and showcase the impressive talents of Violet's playing. Although Violet's recording career would last less than 10 years, her recordings are clearly in Violet's own style and demonstrate her rhythmic precision and flair⁴⁴.

³⁶ Douglas-Home, 1996, 150

³⁷ Douglas-Home, 1996, 168

³⁸ Douglas-Home, 1996, 177-8

³⁹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 182

⁴⁰ Douglas-Home, 1996, 184

⁴¹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 184

⁴² Daily Telegraph, 18/09/1920, 4

⁴³ Douglas-Home, 1996, 205

⁴⁴ Schott, 1997, 515

In the post-war period Violet's playing excelled, her influence again is shown in the correspondence that she had with the Bloomsbury art critic Roger Fry, who also painted a portrait of Violet, and the encouragement that she gave to a young Vere Pilkington to play the harpsichord, clavichord and virginals- he would later become a Chairman at Sotheby's⁴⁵. Violet's professional career marched on too, and she made her first broadcasts for the BBC, and in 1924 played for the first time with Pablo Casals, known as one of the greatest cellists to have ever lived⁴⁶.

Despite Violet's contracts and professional playing, she and her men still struggled with their finances. When Gordon's mother died and left most of her money to his sisters instead of Gordon (she had resented Violet for the way she treated Gordon) they were forced once again to move, this time they gave up Ovington Square and Armscote and moved to Nether Lypiatt, near Stroud⁴⁷. It was here that Violet would live out her days. Violet's mother May also died the same year as Gordon's mother, in 1923, and her brother Rupert, whom she considered to be like her twin, died the next year⁴⁸.

Murder!

Little did Violet know when she moved to Nether Lypiatt, that her money troubles would soon be vanquished. Gordon's two sisters, May and Ella, who had inherited recently when Gordon's mother died were murdered in 1926. The story goes that their butler, Charles Houghton, who had been with them since 1908, had taken to drink and was to be fired from the sisters' employment. So on the morning of the 7th September, Houghton shot Ella and May and then attempted to kill himself. At trial Houghton was convicted of murder and sentenced to hang- despite the efforts of some, including Violet, to get him off. The sisters, before their death, had decided to change their wills to name John Drinkwater as sole inheritor, a man who had arrived at their house as a 14 year old boy in 1908 and had grown to be like a son to them. This amendment however, was not signed before their death so their whole estate went instead to their next of kin Gordon. Violet, reputedly, refused to allow Gordon to give John anything, and the Drinkwater family still blame Violet for John's turn to alcohol and his death in 1971⁴⁹.

The End of a Professional Career & Another World War

With these new riches, Violet found she no longer needed to play for money, and on the 29 March 1927 she performed her last ever recital with Ibbs & Tillett at the Grotrian Hall⁵⁰. However, she did not allow her technique to slip and still performed to intimate gatherings at her house⁵¹. Still now Violet

⁴⁵ Douglas-Home, 1996, 188-190

⁴⁶ Douglas-Home, 1996, 200

⁴⁷ Douglas-Home, 1996, 193-4

⁴⁸ Douglas-Home, 1996, 199

⁴⁹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 207-15

⁵⁰ Douglas-Home, 1996, 227

⁵¹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 229-230

attracted many influential people to hear her play, among them: Lawrence of Arabia, Aldous Huxley, Isiah Berlin, Bertrand Russel, Wilfred Owen, Robert Graves, TS Elliot, John Singer Sargent, Rex Whistler, Picasso, Rodin, Rudyard Kipling, Virginia Woolf, Edith Somerville, Arthur Symons, Kenneth Clark, Ellen Terry, Moria Shearer, John Gielgud, Rachmaninov, Stravinsky, Albéniz, de Falla, Bartók, Henry Wood, and Bruno Walter⁵². This list of people is almost like a who's-who of artists in the mid-20th Century. While Violet's achievements and fame does not rank alongside many of these people, who even now are still household names, the fact that they flocked to see her, some from all over Europe, shows the impact that her playing had and what a powerful woman she was to do all this from her own drawing room.

In 1935 Violet experienced a rejuvenation in her musical inspirations. She met Tom Goff, who upon hearing Violet play gave up his career and began making clavichords. The clavichords that Tom made for Violet were so lovely that Violet slowly began to favour the clavichord over the harpsichord⁵³. Violet's other musical inspiration came in the form of Sachie Sitwell who Violet came to have a very close bond with. Together they researched and revitalized the forgotten works of Domenico Scarlatti, a contemporary of Bach and Handel. From this time until Violet's death Sachie pushed Violet to learn more and more works by Scarlatti, and Violet learnt them not on the harpsichord, for which they had been designed, but on the clavichord, making technically difficult pieces even harder⁵⁴.

In 1938, Violet played for the first time for the royal family. Violet was invited to Buckingham palace where she played for the then Queen Mary, her daughter-in-law Queen Elizabeth, and her daughters the Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret⁵⁵.

World War Two broke out in 1939 and Violet found herself distressed that the country was going to war once more, angry with Winston Churchill, and frustrated with rationing⁵⁶. This war also brought huge changes for Violet; in January 1942 she had a series of accidents where she broke her right wrist and left arm, and on 1st May 1942 Dennis died after a long and lingering illness leaving Violet heartbroken⁵⁷.

All was not bad during this period. Violet met Valda Aveling, a woman in whom she saw a fellow musician and one of the only people whom she taught to play the harpsichord⁵⁸. In January and March 1940 Violet made broadcasts for the BBC on the clavichord, and in July 1941 she recorded 3 harpsichord broadcasts from her home in Nether Lypiatt also for the BBC⁵⁹.

⁵² Douglas-Home, 1996, 230

⁵³ Douglas-Home, 1996, 241-2

⁵⁴ Douglas-Home, 1996, 283

⁵⁵ Douglas-Home, 1996, 247-8

⁵⁶ Douglas-Home, 1996, 257

⁵⁷ Douglas-Home, 1996, 264-5

⁵⁸ Douglas-Home, 1996, 260-1

⁵⁹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 254; 262-3

Little Dark Musician of the Clavichord

At the end of the War, Violet 74 years old and still playing for selected guests in the music room of her house, and she was invited once more to play at Buckingham palace for Queen Elizabeth and her daughters Princess Elizabeth and Margaret in the yellow drawing room⁶⁰. Violet was even approached by Mrs Otto Kahn, the wife of the chairman of New York's Metropolitan Opera House, who suggested that Violet tour America. However, Violet refused because she believed she would not have been able to do herself justice⁶¹.

This would prove to be the last chance that Violet had to make a potential lasting impression on the musical world. In January 1947 Violet fell ill with liver cancer⁶². Although she was very weak Violet still carried on playing up to at least 3 weeks before she died⁶³.

Violet died on the 9th January 1948. Bill and Gordon carried out a vigil next to her body, day and night, for the 5 days until she was put into her coffin and transported back to Folkington, where Bill and Gordon again kept a vigil over her until the funeral⁶⁴. Violet's funeral was held in Folkington parish church and she is buried in the graveyard there. In time when Gordon and Bill died their names were added to the headstone but they were cremated and their ashes scattered over the South Downs nearby, originally Bill wanted his name directly below Violet and above Gordon on the headstone, but Violet's nephew John saw that Gordon remained in the top spot under Violet⁶⁵.

While Gordon was alive he would send flowers to Violet's grave every year on the anniversary of key dates in their life, the Sitwell family too remembered Violet by putting announcements on the anniversary of her death in The Times newspaper for 6 years, there is also a plaque inside Folkington church, composed by Osbert and Sachie Sitwell, and Tom Goff to Violet⁶⁶. Violet's friendship with Sachie had continued throughout her final years, and they had obsessed over Scarlatti with Sachie pushing Violet to learn more pieces by the composer⁶⁷. When Violet died Sachie even wrote a poem dedicated to Violet entitled '*Little Dark Musician of the Clavichord*', where he described her as:

A dear friend I loved, and heard play for thirty years... A player beyond equal in Bach and Mozart, and in sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti... Amongst the greatest solo players there has ever been

- Sacheverell Sitwell⁶⁸

⁶⁰ Douglas-Home, 1996, 293

⁶¹ Douglas-Home, 1996, 296

⁶² Douglas-Home, 1996, 298

⁶³ Douglas-Home, 1996, 301

⁶⁴ Douglas-Home, 1996, 303

⁶⁵ Douglas-Home, 1996, 312

⁶⁶ Douglas-Home, 1996, 304-305; 311

⁶⁷ Douglas-Home, 1996, 285

⁶⁸ Douglas-Home, 1996, 319

Achievements

Violet was undoubtedly regarded by those that heard her play as, on a par, if not the greatest harpsichordist and clavichordist of her day. The closest parallel in terms of musical ability that there was to Violet in her day was Wanda Landowska. Landowska was a professional musician, she toured Europe and America playing the harpsichord, she was a prolific writer, and she taught music, with many of her pupils becoming eminent harpsichordists in their own right⁶⁹. Many people still saw Violet as the better musician due to the feeling and expression that she was able to put into the music that she played.

As mentioned above, perhaps Violet's greatest achievement was not in achieving fame for herself but in the influence that she had over the people of her day, the countless men and women who were completely bewitched by her playing and the affect that this no doubt had on their lives.

Fortunately, Violet's music does live on today and the few recordings that she made survive and can still be listened to, these include classical works by Bach and Handel, her beloved Scarlatti, and English folk pieces by William Byrd. For a recent publication of Violet's work see *The Harpsichord Virtuoso: Violet Gordon Woodhouse*, Trunk Records, released December 2016.

Your Thoughts

While a lot of research around Violet concentrates on the hype that surrounds her private arrangements, and the bewitching affect that she seemed to have on many of her contemporaries, her musical ability should not be forgotten and her skill at reviving the clavichord and harpsichord, and her dedication to become a such a great musician should not be lost in the annals of time. Saying this, her personal life shows a strength of character that was revolutionary for a woman of her time, and while she kept herself surrounded by people who were favourable to her, she certainly challenged quite a few social boundaries.

⁶⁹ Salter, 2017