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# NEWS FROM THE COLONY

## CAREER OF A GREAT SWISS ARTIST IN ENGLAND



**SOPHIE WYSS**

The Nouvelle Société Helvétique recently had the good idea of inviting our compatriot Madame Sophie Wyss to give a talk on her distinguished career as a Lieder singer in this country. She is, of course, well known to our Colony, as she has on various occasions sung for us in the Swiss Church and elsewhere. Thus, the meeting held at the Swiss Hostel for Girls in February, was well attended by old admirers as well as the younger generation who welcomed this opportunity of meeting their famous compatriot. In his introduction, the President, Dr. Egli, expressed his delight to see her fully recovered from her recent illness.

We reproduce below a short version of Madame Wyss's *causerie* which she illustrated with records of some of her most successful performances. The audience followed her fascinating story with intense interest and applauded her warmly at the end.

### **The artist's own story:**

"I was brought up in the northern part of Switzerland, in an ancient little town called La Neuveville on the shores of the lake of Biel. I knew, ever since I was a very little girl, that I would be a singer. My elder and younger sisters also had voices; in fact the elder, Colette Wyss, became a Prima Donna in Germany and gave first performances of *Wozzeck* under Ansermet in Italy, Switzerland and France. I was lucky in being born on the border of the French and German languages, for in the very next village they spoke German. Thus I fell into

German song as quickly as into French without any special study in either.

"I went to the Conservatoire de Genève and took two medals before anyone knew I was there, and later went to the Conservatoire of Basle. I made my debut with *Eurydice* in Gluck's *Orphée* in Geneva. I was thrilled and terrified, but I made a hit with it. But I did not go on with my operatic career. I fell in love with an Englishman, married and settled in England in a little house beside the Thames, where I still live.

"It was my good fortune to find work at the BBC soon after settling in this country. In my first of some three hundred programmes for the BBC I included songs by Arthur Honegger, Germaine Taillefer, Tomasi, Villa-Lobos — songs of a new type. Novelty, that was what the BBC wanted and always will want. Fees were small. I used to get £3/3/0 and was very glad to get it.

"In those early days there was a man at the BBC who laid the foundations for a good serious music policy which has lasted ever since: Edward Clark. Without him, and a few others like Kenneth Wright, and a little later Julian Herbage, the BBC might never have been the intellectual force it is in music today. Another personality who has played a valiant part in English music was Anthony Bernard. Just as Edward Clark was following that new grammar of music the twelve-tone scale in its development on the Danube, Anthony Bernard had his eye on the Seine, and this time Les Six still held sway. I suppose Anthony Bernard had noticed what I was trying to do. He showed me a work by a young Englishman studying with Nadia Boulanger in Paris called "Le Tombeau". It was of the school of "Les Six" and the verses were by Cocteau. We broadcast it in 1929. Thus I came to know Lennox; it was the beginning of an endearing friendship. I sang his Mary Webb songs, his Auden songs and many French songs.

"But I was also exploring many other possibilities in fields of song. That is how I found myself on the Palladium stage one Sunday morning at an audition. Interminable turns were being tried out, dancers, acrobats, comedians, everything.

"At last my turn came and I was really roused and angry at the long wait. So I sang the Coloratura air from "Les Noces de Jeannette" which I had sung in Switzerland, and being rather angry I sang it rather brilliantly. But my later performance was not a success.

"I sang oratorio with Sir Henry Wood. Also Arnold Haskell engaged me to sing at the Arts Theatre during the week in which that greatest of all ballerinas, Tamara Karsavina, was making her farewell. This is how I met Edwin Evans who was arranging the music part of the programme. He chose French 18th Century airs for me to sing between the ballet pieces.

### **MY "CONTEMPORARY RECITAL"**

"Edwin Evans was the President of the International Society of Contemporary Music, and also of its London Centre, which was then an important centre, not too well-loved but greatly respected as an intellectual force. It was a great honour when this Society asked me, a Swiss, to give a recital of first performances of English songs. The composers were: Elizabeth Maconchy, Alan Rawsthorne, Walter Leigh, Patrick Hadley, Lennox Berkeley, Elizabeth Lutyens and Benjamin Britten.

"The chief piece was Elizabeth Maconchy's "How Samson Bore the Gates of Gaza", a poem by the coloured American poet Vachel Lindsay, telling the age-old story of Samson and Delilah, just as a simple Negro preacher would have told it to his flock. Alan Rawsthorne's "Three French Nursery Songs" were a decided success, and Decca made a record of them. Probably this was the first gramophone record to be made of this new generation of composers.

"This concert gave me a certain status in English song, but the international side of my singing went on side by side with it. In 1933 the BBC asked me to take on a work by a Catalan composer, Roberto Gerhard. His "Six Catalan Songs" for voice and orchestra had been a great success at the previous year's International Festival at Vienna. It was given at a "Prom" and Sir Henry was grumbling a little at having to do it. He asked me why I sang all this difficult modern music, but he added: 'I do admire you for doing it'. We had a good Press.

"Soon after, I introduced Willy Burkhard to English audiences — a Swiss Composer who was fighting an up-hill battle against lung trouble in Davos. I gave his cantata, "Herbst" for voice and piano trio, in 1934 at a chamber concert by the Swiss Minister, Monsieur Paravicini, at the Swiss Legation. "The Times" gave me a wonderful notice which touched me deeply. As far as I know I have never met any of "The Times" music critics but from that day onward "The Times" has always lent an indulgent and kindly ear to the new songs I have presented.

"I now came to an incredibly difficult work, Darius Milhaud's cantata "Pan et Syrinx". It was very high-pitched and difficult to get into the voice but after several weeks of work, it fell into place like the pieces of a puzzle. We had an exhausting rehearsal with choir and orchestra under Milhaud in the morning. Never in my life was I so frightened of a breakdown but in the evening all went well and Milhaud was delighted.

(To be continued.)

### MRS. E. P. DICK †

We announce with deep regret the death of Mrs. Kate Dick, *née* Coleman. She died after a long illness on 21st March. Her death took place a little over two years after that of her husband Paul so well remembered by the Swiss community in this country for his musical activities. He died in his 74th year on 4th February 1963 after fifty-three years in England. He was on the staff of the Swiss Bank Corporation and, for many years, conductor of the Swiss Orchestral Society and the Swiss Male Choir.

There was a Requiem Mass for Mrs. Dick at St. Mary's, Holly Place, N.W.3, on 26th March, followed by interment at Hampstead Borough Cemetery.

Kate and Paul Dick will be remembered by their many friends, and we extend our sincere sympathy to their daughter Kay in her sad bereavement.

### PERSONAL

The marriage took place of Miss Silvia Oertli, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. J. Oertli of 13, Osidge Lane, N.14, to Mr. Michael Lovett at Christ Church, Cockfosters, on Saturday, 20th March. We wish the young couple much happiness for the future.

### SWISS EMBASSY IN GREAT BRITAIN

#### CHANGE OF ADDRESS

The Offices of the Swiss Embassy in London, hitherto situated at 18 Montagu Place, W.1, have been transferred to

**77-81 GLOUCESTER PLACE, LONDON W.1**  
on the 20th March 1965

These temporary new premises are adjacent to the present Consular and Visa Section of the Embassy at 1 Montagu Place, W.1.

The Embassy's telephone numbers remain the same

**PADDINGTON 0701-0706**

The Swiss Ambassador will retain his present residence at 21 Bryanston Square, London W.1, until further notice.

### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

We wish to thank the following subscribers for sending donations above their subscriptions and for taking out or renewing gift subscriptions: Miss G. Barnes, Miss J. Berlinger (Wil SG), Miss I. Buff (Herisau), Mrs. D. C. Delaney, Mrs. F. Horsfall, Miss J. Steiger, Mrs. T. Tanner, Mrs. E. West, Miss I. White and Messrs. P. Bessire, F. Blaser, O. J. Brunner, E. Bryner, R. Kaiser, A. Kunzler, A. G. T. Luminati, H. E. Messmer, A. F. Rigiani, J. Schmid, M. Schneider (Basle), W. Wagner, P. Wiesendanger, J. Zimmermann. We are most grateful for their kind and welcome support.

### KLAVIERABEND HELEN WOHLGEMUTH

Am Samstag, den 27. März, gab Helen Wohlgemuth, die sich als Pianistin in der Schweiz, und besonders in Basel, ihrer Heimatstadt, bereits einen Namen gemacht hat, einen Klavierabend in der Wigmore Hall.

Das Programm war sehr geschickt zusammengestellt, indem moderne Komponisten wie Georges Enesco, Hans Huber, Albert Moeschinger und Raffaele d'Alessandro an den Anfang gestellt waren. So konnte der Zuhörer sich eingangs mit ihm noch unbekannter Musik auseinander setzen, um sich nachher dem Genusse von sehr schönen klassischen Kompositionen: — Impromptu von Schubert und je einer Sonate von Mozart und Beethoven — hingeben.

Das Programm stellte hohe Anforderungen an die Pianistin. Ihr Können kam besonders darin zum Ausdruck, dass die langsamten Momente beschaulich-besinnlich und die schnellen Sätze nicht hastig vorgetragen wurden. Auch die Vielfalt der Gestaltungskraft, die sich im Wechsel zwischen Weichheit und Kraft des Anschlags widerspiegelte, erstaunte und beglückte diejenigen, die Helen Wohlgemuth noch nicht kannten. Den schönen Abend beschloss die Künstlerin mit einer Dreingabe.

*E. R. Schulthess.*