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SOPHIE WYSS

CAREER OF A GREAT SWISS ARTIST IN
ENGLAND

(Concluded)

"This performance gave a twenty year-old student at the Royal College some idea of what *could* be written for high voice . . . that one could forget all that had been written before . . . that one could start afresh. I met him afterwards, a boy with crisp, curly fair hair, a pale and expressive face, often lit up with a charming laugh. It was Benjamin Britten . . . He really seemed as though he were from the Olympian land of Pan and Syrinx about which I had been singing. He never seemed to have to learn anything, he knew it all before by instinct. He played piano accompaniments with the ease and grace of someone who had given a lifetime to the piano. He played what extra little effects could be conjured from each instrument. We would work away together at my house, he, urging me to do the almost impossible; then he would go out to play cricket with my ten-year-old son; then we would all dine together and he would talk with bitter humour about the way the world was drifting to war; then he would telephone with frenzied energy to his circle of friends . . . already a formidable circle it was, too, W. H. Auden, Louis McNeice, Stephen Spender, Lennox Berkeley . . .

"Thus he composed "Our Hunting Fathers", a symphonic cycle for soprano and orchestra to old verses collected and modernised by W. H. Auden. It was commissioned by the Norwich Festival for 1936. My second son was born just in time for me to sing it. The doctor had forbidden me to sing for several weeks, so my husband and I met Benjamin with his mother and sister in a lovely little Cornish village, and there every summer morning we met in the village hall and Benjamin played and sang "Our Hunting Fathers" to me, so that when I was able to resume my singing, half of the work had been done already.

"We had a rehearsal with orchestra in the loft at Covent Garden. But the boys of the orchestra were not used to that kind of music, and behaved like very naughty boys. The rehearsal broke up in noise and disorder. It was a terrible experience for Benjamin, but on the day at Norwich, those schoolboys rallied round and tackled the nimble complexities of the score with good spirit and fair success.

"Later I gave the first performance of the second work which Benjamin Britten wrote for me. "On this Island", a song cycle to W. H. Auden's verses. We gave the first performance at a BBC monthly concert, singer, composer and poet.

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL

"In 1938 the International Festival of Contemporary Music took place in London. The "Daily Telegraph" backed it, and when the "Daily Telegraph" backs anything, it does so in a large way — advance news stories, gossip items, the whole works, day after day. The Queen's Hall was booked for the two orchestral concerts and all the trumpets sounded. Meanwhile, the Swiss section of the Society had naturally asked me to sing the part in Willy Burkhard's oratorio "Das Gesicht Jesaya's" for the orchestral concert and the Spanish section engaged me to sing "Three Lorca Poems" for voice and orchestra by Bautista in the only other orchestral concert. On top of

that, Ernst Krenek himself asked my sister Colette to sing his latest cantata as one of the two chamber concerts at Concert Hall. So there was something of a plethora of the Sisters Wyss at this Festival.

"The real joke about the whole thing was that the "Telegraph" music critics proceeded to tear to pieces the works done at this Festival which their own paper had backed so generously. In fact it became so ridiculous that Vaughan Williams himself had to write to the "Daily Telegraph" about "Das Gesicht Jesaya's" to put the matter right.

"Auden had inspired Benjamin with the glory of Rimbaud's verse during a week-end they had spent with Auden's family near Birmingham . . . above all with "Les Illuminations". Benjamin resolved to write a work for voice and string orchestra. The first two, "Being Beauteous" and "Marine" we did at a concert given by John Hoeck in Birmingham. They were repeated at a "Prom" in August, 1939. And dear Sir Henry grumbled again!

"A few months later Britten finished the work, ten verses in all, I did the preliminary work with Franz Reizenstein, and I had a wonderful letter from Benjamin for my guidance. I gave the first performance with Boyd Neel in London in 1940. We had a great reception and what Ernest Newman had wittily called "The Battle Over Britten" was as good as won. At any rate it was my greatest battle.

"In 1942 I coupled "Les Illuminations" with a most charming new work which Matyas Seiber had sent me — Four Greek Love Songs. I was recording quite a lot for Decca at that time. During these years I worked a good deal with Gerald Finzi. I had a cottage near his lovely home in Berkshire, but neither of us were often there, as he worked at one of the Ministries in London, while I was constantly on tour, as I have said, singing to the Free French, to Universities and at military camps. It was at this time, by the way, that I teamed up with Yvonne Arnaud, a fine pianist as well as a great actress. We did joint recitals together, and after the war several broadcasts and a television or two. Working when I could with Gerald Finzi I learned much about the older English song. He made arrangements of masterpieces by Purcell and Arne — "Dido's Lament," "Bess o'Bedlam", "Byrd's Cradle Song" — what a loss his early death has been to English music!

"The first valuable find that came to me after the war was Arnold Cooke. He had spent the war dashing about the Mediterranean in a destroyer. His music is deeply felt, rather severe in the earlier works, but later was compared to Bizet. I sang some of his songs at the Wigmore Hall with other first performances of Alan Rawsthorne and Willy Burkhard.

"Charles Reid in the "Observer", writing about Willy Burkhard's songs said: "A fabric of the purest music in which every demi-semi quaver, whether of voice or piano falls with a delicate eloquence". He also had the kindness to say that having heard Flagstad in dramatic song and myself in Chamber music in that same week, he knew that art of singing was not dead.

"At this time I met that brilliant young man Antony Hopkins. He wrote for me and made lovely arrangements of old songs, both English and French. The British Council sent us on a tour of France and Switzerland. I shall never forget singing in the Ducal Palace in Dijon to an audience of the real Resistance people.

"I went to Australia in 1948. The music director of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, Mr. James, said to me: 'As long as you are in Australia, Madame, it is all

yours every Sunday night at six'. So I gave a series of six concerts and they gave me carte blanche, and never once quibbled at my choice of programme. So I gave them something of everything I had in my repertoire — I introduced new English names to the Australian public; I gave recitals of German Lieder, French Song, Spanish and of course Folk Song.

"In 1950 it was the centenary of William Wordsworth's death and the composer William Wordsworth, who is a descendant of the poet's brother, composed a song cycle with string quartet to the famous "Daffodil" verses, and the London verses. I broadcast these during the celebration week. At this time I also made a record of Eric Satie's "La Mort de Socrate", a work of really astonishing simplicity to accompany exalted prose. I presented it for the first time in this country with Constant Lambert at the Institut Français with Norman Franklin at the piano. As far as I know I am the only person who has sung Louis Duret's little masterpiece "Image de Crusoe" in England, and Duret is the least known of the six. The verse is by St. Leger, who was born on just such a Caribbean isle as Crusoe's, and there is the smell of the sea, of the palms and the sand in it.

"I also recorded some early songs of the great Georges Enesco, *ce cher grand maître*, the last of his kind and his class — an able composer, a great violinist, pianist, conductor, and teacher. It was Miron Grindea, with his instinctive vision of the born impressario, who brought us together.

"Another young student composer who came to me at this time was Philip Cannon. It was his bride who found the old troubadour songs which he set for voice and harp. It was this work which cemented my friendship with the Countess Benckendorf, Korchinska, the wonderful harpist, who played it with me.

"In 1952 I sang at the Edinburgh Festival. After a week of heavy modern Germanics, I gave a recital of French song from the Troubadours to Poulanc. And Gerald Moore and I were able to make the audience laugh and sing the refrain of "Troupieaux" with me. That is the first time — and probably the last — that an Edinburgh Festival audience has been made to sing a chorus! I made an unpublished record of it with Benjamin Britten at the piano, and dedicated it to my two sons. Richard Rodney Bennett, then only sixteen, who heard me sing at the Edinburgh Festival, sent me an excellent song to a French poem. I put it in a programme I gave at the Institut Français! He has since scored many successes including an Opera at Sadlers Wells. I met his mother the other day and she thanked me warmly for having been the first artist to help Richard at an early age.

"Monsieur Henri Jourdan, head of the Institut Français, asked me to celebrate the first twenty-five years of my singing in England, and later he asked me to celebrate my thirtieth singing year in this country."

WELFARE OFFICE FOR SWISS GIRLS IN GREAT BRITAIN

(For Information, Advice or Help)

11 Belsize Park, London N.W.3.
(Nearest Underground Station: Belsize Park)

RECEPTION HOURS

Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Saturday
2 p.m. to 5 p.m. or by appointment.

FORTHCOMING EVENTS

Every Sunday 7 to 11 p.m. — The Swiss Catholic Youth Club — Social at Westminster Ball Room, 30 Stratton Ground, S.W.1.

Every Thursday, from 6 to 7.30 p.m. — Discussion Circle in English — Young men specially invited. Tea from 6 to 6.15 p.m. Swiss Y.M.C.A., London Central Y.M.C.A. Building, Great Russell Street, W.C.1.

Every 1st Wednesday in the month — Secours Mutuels des Suisses à Londres — meeting at Swiss House, 35 Fitzroy Square, W.1, at 7 p.m.

Every last Thursday of the Month — Swiss Club Manchester — Ordinary Monthly Meeting from 6 p.m. at the Midland Hotel, Manchester.

APRIL:

Sunday, 25th, 7.30 p.m. — Royal Festival Hall — Geza Anda plays Brahms' Piano Concerto No. 1 with the London Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent.

Sunday, 25th — Swiss Rifle Association — SHOOTING — Bisley (Siberia Range).

Sunday, 25th — Swiss Club Manchester — EASTER OUTING.

Tuesday, 27th, 8 p.m. — Royal Festival Hall — Nikita Magaloff plays Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 with the Halle Orchestra conducted by Sir John Barbirolli.

Wednesday, 28th, 7.30 p.m. — Wigmore Hall — PIANO RECITAL — ALBERT FERBER (Schubert, Glazounov, Balakirev).

Thursday, 29th — Swiss Club Manchester — MONTHLY MEETING.

MAY:

Sunday, 2nd, 6.15 p.m. — Swiss Catholics — ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING — Westminster Ball Room, 30 Stratton Ground, S.W.1.

Sunday, 2nd, 7 p.m. — Swiss Catholic SPECIAL EASTER SERVICE: Sung Mass and Sermon in German, French and Italian — St. Ann's Church, Abbey Orchard Street, S.W.1.

Sunday, 9th — Unione Ticinese — TEA DANCE — Dorchester Hotel, Park Lane, W.1. — Tickets at £1 from Mr. F. A. De Maria, 4 Luxemburg Gardens, W.6.

Sunday, 9th — Swiss Rifle Association — SHOOTING — Bisley (Siberia Range).

Wednesday, 12th, 7.30 p.m. — Wigmore Hall — SONG RECITAL — HAZEL SCHMID (soprano) — (Schubert, Wolf).

Thursday, 13th — Swiss Club Manchester — FILM SHOW.

Thursday, 13th, 7.45 p.m. — Nouvelle Société Helvétique — OPEN MEETING — Dr. Kurt Gasteyer — "Swiss Security in the Nuclear Age" — Swiss Hostel for Girls.

Tuesday, 18th — City Swiss Club — DINNER AND CARD EVENING — Dorchester Hotel, W.1.

Sunday, 23rd — Swiss Rifle Association — SHOOTING — Bisley (Siberia Range).