

AUSTRALIAN OPERA AUDITIONS COMMITTEE (NSW)

ROYAL SYDNEY GOLF CLUB

FRIDAY 10 OCTOBER 1986

A TRIBUTE TO DAME JOAN HAMMOND DBE, CMG

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The Hon. Justice Michael Kirby, CMG  
President of the Court of Appeal  
Patron of the Australian Opera Auditions Committee

AN AUSTRALIAN INSPIRATION

To put it quite simply, Joan Hammond is an inspiration to my generation of music lovers in Australia. She burst upon the scene just before the Second World War. She reached the zenith of her popularity in the late 1940's and 1950's. Her career as a top artist was prematurely cut short for health reasons. But it had coincided with the development of recording technology which took her strong, clear voice and superb diction, to thousands of her fellow Australians, and millions more. Because she was Australian, she captured the imagination of people, some of whom might not otherwise have found the key into the marvellous world of classical music. She helped break down the stereotype of the Australian - as a mindless beer swilling, ocker talking footy fan. For me, she was nothing less than the inspiration that kindled my love of music, and especially song. That is why I am delighted to take part in this musical tribute to her.

She has written, on a number of occasions, of the personal reserve and anxiety which public scrutiny of her personality causes her.<sup>1</sup> This anxiety is quite separate from

the "nerves" which afflict most artists and frequently add an edge to the quality of their performance. Joan Hammond is, and always has been, a very private person. So for her, submitting to this tribute, will be something of an ordeal. But, as she is a very special person I know that she will face it with courage and resignation, knowing that we offer it in love, appreciation and admiration.

It is a precious feature of the life of a top artist today, that he or she can become part of the private intellectual world of millions. The development of a love of music, is part of the growth of the soul of any person. To contribute to that growth is a special privilege. In her private moments, Joan Hammond must take a good deal of pleasure from the enrichment of the lives of the millions who still enjoy her voice, through recordings which are released and re-released.

She is perennially popular, especially throughout the English speaking world. But, in Australia she is especially important. Being a symbol of a home girl made good, she had an influence and an impact, which would not have been the case had she not been Australian. We were, and are, proud of her. That pride made us attend to her wonderful voice. The tradition of great Australian sopranos is virtually unbroken. In the trinity of Melba, Hammond and Sutherland, Joan Hammond is special to me. She burst into my life at the time when I was first learning of music. That is why I was glad to have this opportunity to remind those who shared that time with me and to share with those who are younger, the voice of an extraordinary Australian artist of rare quality.

### GOLFER OR SINGER?

Joan Hammond's life's journey began, curiously enough, in Christchurch, New Zealand. She was born there soon after her parents moved from London, to get away from its weather. Finding that Christchurch was not all that different, they moved to Sydney. Young Joan grew up in the leafy suburb of Killara.<sup>2</sup> She wanted to be a violinist. Happily for us, a bike accident and injury to her arm diverted her to singing. She was not so enthusiastic for singing at first. In church, at the Presbyterian Ladies College in Sydney, she would always sit next to a girl given to fainting, in order to avoid the austerities of Presbyterian hymn singing.<sup>3</sup>

She was a splendid golfer and won junior championships, many of them at this very golf course.<sup>4</sup> Fortunately a few key people took an interest in her voice. She won through 600 competitors to gain a place in the company of J.C. Williamson's troupe. In her autobiography, she reflects on the occasional misery of the artist in the chorus. But she also tells of the funny things that happened - as when four soldiers in Aida forgot to lower their spears, consequently tearing down most of the stage scenery.<sup>5</sup> The fall of Babylon was nothing to the fall of Egypt! In the future it was to be her voice that would bring the house down.

One of my earliest musical memories is of listening to her urgent duet "Heaven! my father!" from Aida. Sung in English, it was the more vivid because the drama could be understood. Joan Hammond recorded many opera arias and duets in English, although she was an accomplished linguist. It is not generally known that during the War, recording in foreign

languages was proscribed for the duration. This was, I suppose, a contribution of sorts to the war effort! Aida was to become one of her special roles. The power and strength demanded of the artist suited her voice:

[Here interpolate excerpt from "O patria mia" from Act 3 of Verdi's Aida.<sup>6</sup>]

At this time in her life, Joan Hammond's career was alternating between golf championships and singing engagements, the latter in the most unlikely places. She sang at fashion parades for Grace Bros. in Sydney - usually popular music - for four guineas a week. She became a journalist for the Daily Telegraph.<sup>7</sup> Had not fate intervened, that might have been her life.

#### ENTER THE FAIRY GODMOTHER

In 1934 a woman who was profoundly to affect her career heard her sing at a Vice Regal reception at the old Australia Hotel in Sydney. Lady Gowrie - whom Joan Hammond was to call her fairy godmother - heard her sing "The Green Hills of Somerset". She was so taken by this young woman's peerless voice that she insisted that she sing the song over again to the dismay - and irritation of her fellow artists. It is little wonder that she was soon organising a Joan Hammond fund to raise the money to send this promising artist to Europe for the instruction necessary to lift her to world class.<sup>8</sup>

[Here insert excerpt from Eric Coates' "Green Hills O'Somerset"<sup>9</sup>]

The young successful golfer and operative chorus girl was suddenly on a boat taking her to Europe, and specifically to Vienna. Sooner than she imagined she was in this city of music participating in what she described as a "cultural orgy".<sup>10</sup>

Lotte Lehmann, Kirsten Flagstad and Elisabeth Schumann were the artists whose voices filled her spare time as she sat in the cheapest seats of the State Opera. In the very rostrum where forty years earlier Gustav Mahler had stood, Toscanini led the orchestra. Richard Tauber sang Don Giovanni. She describes this time as one where her "bones" were "satiated with music of every kind".<sup>11</sup> She even sang for the great Bruno Walter who told her that she had an "unusual" voice and invited her to get in touch with him before the next season. Sadly, she did not do so. But fate remained kind to her. She alternated between performances in Vienna and London. Her operatic debut was as Nedda in I Pagliacci. In London, through Lady Gowrie's guiding intervention, she was also offered many recitals. One song, constantly in demand, was "The Last Rose of Summer":

[Here interpolate extract from "The Last Rose of Summer".<sup>12</sup>]

Back in Vienna in 1938, Anschluss had brought the Nazis. So the young Australian soprano was always happy to get back to London and away from the neurotic world of the Oppression. At this time, she performed in The Messiah for the first time under Sir Thomas Beecham. Her performances in oratorio and Lieder recitals became ever more frequent and popular. The outbreak of War terminated for a time her link with Vienna. She returned to England. In June 1940, in dark days, she recorded her first gramophone record. It was "On Wings of Song" by Mendelsohn. How often I listened to it with delight as a youth. It was at this time that she fell under the wise guiding influence of Dr. (later Sir) Malcolm Sargent. He was, like her, a fastidious perfectionist. He realised her special suitability for the

sensitive and lovely songs of Puccini. Nowhere is this sensuousness more wonderfully demonstrated than in the duet "Love me a Little"

[Here interpolate "Love Me a Little" from Madama Butterfly<sup>13</sup>]

Indeed, Puccini became a special favourite with Joan Hammond's growing band of admirers - through concerts and records. Few recitals at this time of war time benefits and entertainment of the troops was complete without the aria "One Fine Day" from Act II of Madam Butterfly:

[Here interpolate extract from "One Fine Day"<sup>14</sup>]

It was at about this time that Joan Hammond cut a record that was to sell a million and assure her reputation throughout the world, as a creative artist in the first rank. Most Australians of my age and interests know virtually every note and cadence of the record. On one side was "Love and Music" from Tosca, also by Puccini.

[Here insert extract from "Love and Music" from Tosca.<sup>15</sup>]  
And as if that masterpiece were not enough, on the reverse side was a hitherto little known piece from Gianni Schicchi by Puccini "O My Beloved Father":

[Here interpolate extract from "O My Beloved Father"<sup>16</sup>]

#### RETURN TO AUSTRALIA

At the end of the War, Joan Hammond was singing Tosca in Glasgow. It was not long before she accepted the invitation to return to Australia. She came out on a flying boat which landed in Rose Bay in June 1946. It was not an entirely happy series of engagements. She was not aware of the extent to which the media had followed her career in England. She was a popular

celebrity. She suffered the darts that we like to throw at Australians who succeed. The news clippings of the time show the trivia and hurtful stories that surrounded this very private woman when she came back here. There were attacks on her mink coat - so necessary, as it proved to fight off the cold of the then primitive Australian concert halls and artist's rooms. She was criticised for her program which was said to be "too high brow". She received a letter castigating her for "singing stuff no one wants".<sup>17</sup> Unsavoury articles appeared twisting interviewed statements which she made about her parents' address. In short, you can see that, so far as the Australian media is concerned, nothing much has changed. The tour was a financial "flop".<sup>18</sup> Taxation took most of the profits. The Federal Commissioner would not even allow her deduction for hotel expenses. Joan Hammond, as Aida would, went into battle. She won an appeal on this point, thereby protecting future artists and proving that judges, at least, are not all barbarians. Like the media, the Tax Commissioner has not changed his spots in the intervening decade.

She returned to Vienna for the first time since the War. She was the first British artist so invited and she sang La Boheme. Interestingly, in England she refused to sing "Land of Hope and Glory" at the end of the Proms. She explained that this was unsuitable to her voice. It required a contralto and she refused it "for Elgar's sake".<sup>19</sup>

#### WORLD ARTIST

It was at this time that her career reached its zenith. She went to New York to sing Tosca. Mrs. Roosevelt declared that she had the most perfect diction - and certainly this was



always a special strength of her artistic performance.<sup>20</sup> Sadly she was asked to step in for Kathleen Ferrier - another great British artist - who was not long to survive her struggle with cancer. She began to receive invitations from all over the world as her fame spread. She travelled to South Africa. In Malaya, it was said that her records outsold even those of Bing Crosby.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps her most notable accomplishment was her performance in Tschaikovsky's Eugene Onegin, singing in Russian at the Bolshoi:

[Here interpolate extract from Eugene Onegin.<sup>22</sup>]

There seemed to be no limit to where her career would take her. But she always had a strong social conscience. One sign of this was the recitals she gave to men in prison in England. In her book, she tells of her moving encounter with prisoners in Wandsworth prison. A favourite amongst them was another record which sold a million. It was the aria "O Silver Moon" from Dvorak's Russalka:

[Here interpolate extract from "O Silver Moon" by Dvorak.<sup>23</sup>]

#### ENFORCED RETIREMENT

There is no telling where this wonderful career might not have gone. But fate intervened. In November 1965 Joan Hammond suffered her first coronary attack. Her last public singing performance took place soon after that. At the funeral for Lady Gowrie, nothing could stop her fulfilling the wish of her patron. Save for that, the public career of this splendid artist was over. The last encore was sung. Her public artistic life was prematurely brought to a close by nature's intervention.

In her autobiography, Joan Hammond describes her return to Australia and a life pottering in the garden, growing her flowers, especially roses which are her favourite.<sup>24</sup> Now and again the media carries an item about her. She underwent major surgery to remove skin cancers left on her lip - just another unwelcome gift of an antipodean sun to a delicate English complexion not meant for this part of the world.

In 1969 EMI Records presented her with a golden disc in tribute to the sales of the record "O My Beloved Father". Civil honours were showered upon her in recognition of her contribution to Australian music and her vast popularity. In 1953, she was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire. In 1963, she became a Commander of that Order. In 1972, she was made a Companion of the Order of St. Michael and St. George. In 1974, she was elevated to be a Dame of the Order of the British Empire. Her membership of that Order is entirely appropriate as her birthday she shared with Queen Victoria, 24 May. In her childhood, cracker night coincided with birthday celebrations for this young girl who was to go so far and bring sparkles and inspiration to the lives of so many.

She set up her life, upon her return to Australia, in Melbourne. She has been supported by her secretary and companion of many years, Lolita Marriott whom we are pleased to have with us tonight. She was made a member of the Board of the Victorian State Opera. In her professional work she heads the School of Vocal Studies in the Victorian College of the Arts. As was shown in a delightful interview, as an interval piece in a television opera simulcast recently, she is still busily at work instructing the up and coming Australian artists who will continue the grand tradition which she herself maintained.

In 1983, it was reported in the British magazine "The Gramophone" that her wonderful collection of her own recordings had been lost in the Ash Wednesday bushfires. Readers of the magazine responded magnificently to an appeal by EMI. Indeed, recordings were produced from all over the British Isles.<sup>25</sup> And out of this misfortune, good came. EMI released a fresh collection of "The Art of Dame Joan Hammond".<sup>26</sup> It will be a wonder if it too does not sell a million.

#### IN GOD'S IMAGE

Here is the voice - strong, confident yet sensitive. Just as it was when, encouraged by them, wide eyed, I pressed my ear to the old gramophone in my parent's home at Concord. I was then so proud that this world artist was an Australian. I was encouraged by the knowledge that my country could boast of something beyond popular culture, from which I usually felt alienated. Here was a signal that Australia, despite the sunshine, beer and circuses, was also a land sharing proudly the great tradition of musical civilisation from the other side of the world. Here was a crystal clear voice, usually in my own tongue, leading me, as by a thread of Adriadne, into the world of opera and song.

So I am glad that this occasion has presented for me, as one Australian citizen speaking, I know for hundreds of thousands of fellow citizens, to pay this tribute to an artist who deserves our approbation. And we, who collect together to promote the coming generation of the Australian Opera, through the Auditions Committee, do well to remember the career that was behind this glorious voice. But for a few chance happenings, it might never have been shared with a wider world - and with us. Life will always have a high element of chance -

especially the life of the artist. What ordeals they go through to succeed. But precious talents, such as the gift of song, should be recognised, encouraged and assisted. And if you ever happen upon doubt concerning the great Australian singing tradition, and the need to nurture it and provide for its continuation, you should go back to your record collection. There, through the miracles of technology, as sharp and clear as when it was first recorded is a voice in the front rank. And behind the voice is a private, accomplished, handsome and modest woman who brought credit on her country, on those who recognised her talent, on her family and on herself. Beyond that still, she heaped laurels on the international stage of opera and song. A peerless voice! - With its infinite capacity to lift our spirits to a higher plane, as if to prove that we mere humans are, after all, made in God's image.

[Close with excerpt from "Ave Maria" (Bach-Gounod)<sup>27</sup>]

FOOTNOTES

1. J. Hammond, "A Voice, A Life", Gollancz, London, 1970, 31.
2. *ibid*, 16.
3. *id*, 20.
4. *id*, 27.
5. *id*, 30.
6. Recording: J. Hammond, "O patria mia", Aida, Act 3 (G. Verdi), Philharmonia Orchestra (Glauco Curiel) 2 XEA 861/ALP 1407 (1946).
7. Hammond, 35.
8. *ibid*, 38.
9. Recording: J. Hammond, "Green Hills o' Somerset", (E. Coates); G. Moore piano, CA 18459/DB 205 (1941).
10. Hammond, 61.
11. *ibid*.
12. Recording: J. Hammond, "The Last Rose of Summer" (Trad) Ernest Lush, piano; OEA 14550/D 1958 (1950)
13. Recording: J. Hammond, "Ah, Love Me a Little", "Madama Butterfly", G. Puccini, Act 1; with Webster Booth (Tenor) and Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (Sir Malcolm Sargent); 2 ER 722-3/C 3378 (1944).
14. Recording: J. Hammond, "One Fine Day" from Act 11 Madama Butterfly, ibid; CAX 8827/DX 1003 (1941).
15. Recording: J. Hammond, "Love and Music" from G. Puccini "Tosca", Act 11; Halle Orchestra (Leslie Heward); CA 18737/DB 2052 (1941).
16. Recording: J. Hammond, "O My Beloved Father" from G. Puccini, "Gianni Schicchi"; Halle Orchestra (Leslie Heward) OXLP 7520.

17. Hammond, 159.
18. *ibid*, 168.
19. *id*, 173.
20. Cited in Woman's Day, 18 July 1949.
21. Courier Mail, 10 July 1953.
22. Recording: J. Hammond, "I Write to You", Tchaikovsky, "Eugene Onegin", Act 1; Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra (Constant Lambert) CAX 9129-31/DX 1134-5 (1943).
23. Recording: J. Hammond, "O Silver Moon"; A. Dvorak, "Russalka", Act 1, Philharmonia Orchestra, (Vilem Tausky) 2 EA 16266/DB 21451 (1952).
24. Hammond, 238.
25. Daily Telegraph, 28 June 1983.
26. Recording: EMI Records Limited, "The Art of Dame Joan Hammond", HMV Treasury, RLS 2900143 (2 LP set) (1984).
27. Recording: J. Hammond "Ave Marie" (Bach-Gounod), Bertram Harrison (organ) OXLP 7520.