

AUSTRALIAN OPERA AUDITIONS COMMITTEE
DINNER TO HONOUR DAME JOAN SUTHERLAND AC DBE

AIRPORT HILTON, SYDNEY

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We are the music makers
And we are the dreamers of dreams
Wandering by lone seabreakers
And sitting by desolate streams

World losers and world foresakers
On whom the pale moon gleams
Yet we are the movers and shakers
Of the world forever, it seems.

- A W E O'Shaunnessy "Ode"

A FAMILIAR JOURNEY

The journey upon which I am to take you is a familiar one. It is known to many Australians as a kind of musical odyssey. The chief points in the journey are said, one after another, as we trace in our minds the intertwined careers of two remarkable citizens of our country. Their triumphs have been, in a sense, the triumph of the best in Australian life.

All around us, we see features of our country and of its people that cause us pride. Its physical beauty and austere grandeur. Its egalitarian spirit and renunciation of class. Its absorption, with a fair degree of tolerance, of

people and cultures of so many lands. But in the field of the arts and literature, of music and creative work our brightest stars have not, always, been fully recognised. The national and international recognition of Dame Joan Sutherland and also of Richard Bonyngé are therefore especially precious to us. For they carry a banner and hold it high as an inspiration for those beside and coming after them. That banner proclaims a dedication, by hard work, to excellence, to creativity, to novelty, to adventures of the mind. It appeals to something universal in humanity and eternal.

So that is why we, a group of Australians, have joined together on this special night to pay a tribute. It will not be the first, nor will it be the last of the tributes paid to Dame Joan Sutherland as she embarks upon her last Australian opera season. There have been, and will be, occasions more glittering and speeches more eloquent. But no gathering will offer a more heartfelt, affectionate and passionate tribute than this one. For linking us, like a golden thread, is the intangible commitment to music, to which Joan and Richard (as I hope I may call them) have dedicated their lives. Not content with nostalgia and in the intensely practical spirit of our two guests, our organisation is dedicated to future artists. We hope that some at least will be of their calibre; for there is never an end to high talent. We certainly know that all will draw inspiration from their

lives and the good fortune of fate that brought those lives together. Good fortune for them, for their country and for the realm of music that knows no boundaries.

THE FORCE OF DESTINY

Joan Sutherland was born in Sydney one November in peace-time. She was educated at St Catherine's School, Waverley. Her mother, Muriel Sutherland, was a fine mezzo soprano. She had been trained by a teacher who had been a pupil of Melba's teacher. In that way is the training of singers passed, like the laying on of hands in the Church, from one generation to another. Muriel Sutherland continued to practise after her family arrived. She would do her scales for 20 minutes each day. The young Joan would sit at her feet, listen attentively and she would imitate her. What a splendid fortune it was for this creative gift that it was nurtured in that special homely way. Young Joan had recordings of all the old singers: Melba and Caruso. She had an idea that it would be wonderfully romantic to sing at Convent Garden. But she looked on this as a pipe dream and gave it little thought. With her mother's encouragement she sang constantly. From her earliest years her life was full of song.

Joan's first appearances were with music clubs. She was occasionally accompanied at the piano by a gifted student of the New South Wales State Conservatorium of Music, Richard

Bonyngé. Her life at this time was uneventful. As is well known, she trained and worked as a stenographer. In 1949 she won the Sydney Sun Aria Competition. She decided to give up her work as a secretary to concentrate on singing. She was encouraged in this decision by her mother. Let us pause to reflect upon the debt we owe to all mothers and, at this moment, to Joan's mother.

In 1950 Joan Sutherland won the Mobil Quest in Sydney. They were far-away days of Jack Davey, Bob Dyer and ears glued to the wireless set which is such a happy companion for those who love music. Like many young Australians I used to listen to the Mobil Quest in those days. Perhaps some of you remember the thrilling moments when the judges, for once, made a critical decision that was to have such a consequence for Dame Joan's career.

The decision was made to continue her training in London. On 31 May 1951 - which you will remember was the year when half a century of Federation was celebrated - Joan Sutherland performed for the first time on stage in an opera. It was Judith by Eugene Goossens. Reserved seats sold for 7s:6d. They could be bought at Nicholsons and Palings. Do you remember those happy stores?

To speed the young Joan Sutherland on her way to Europe, a farewell concert was held at the Sydney Town Hall in April 1951. The pianist was Marie Van Hove. The accompanying tenor was Ronald Dowd, who sadly died just this year. The concert was a triumph. Listen to the voice of

those far off days captured on a rare recording.

* Here insert the early 1951 recording of Joan Sutherland singing in Sydney.

In July 1951, accompanied by her mother, Joan Sutherland sailed out of the Sydney Heads on the "Maloja". Like our Prime Minister of the time, Mr Menzies, she took the boat to England along the sea lanes of the Empire. But her objective was not Lords. It was the Royal College of Music. By chance, Richard Bonyngue was also a student there. And by specially happy chance his inquisitive musical eyes had fallen upon a then insufficiently studied operatic works of the bel canto operas of the 19th century.

By 1952 Joan Sutherland had speedily been accepted into the company of the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden. By October she was the First Lady in Die Zauberflöte. By November she was singing in Aida. Later that month she sang in Norma by Bellini. The title role was sung by Maria Callas, herself a stimulus to the revival of bel canto.

So rapidly did Joan Sutherland rise that by December 1952 she was singing her first leading role. It was Amelia in Verdi's Un Ballo in Maschera. At a late stage she took over from an artiste who was ill. But she soon demonstrated the special gifts that were to become legendary.

In October 1954, freshly returned from travel to Rhodesia, Joan Sutherland married Richard Bonyngue in London.

It has proved one of the most fortunate marriages for musical creativity in our century. Under the tutelage of Richard Bonyngge, Joan was to discover her special strengths. She was to be saved from the conventional wisdom which would have pushed her to the world of Wagnerian opera. Instead, Richard temporarily suspended his own budding career as a concert pianist to nurture and refine what he called "that colossal, strong, steely instrument", the Sutherland voice. His guidance was dedicated and careful. He helped her to develop a remarkable technique and artistry that would carry her to the heights of the operatic world.

The years of the early fifties were years of consolidation. Joan Sutherland sang the Les Contes d'Hoffmann for the first time in 1954. By 1970 she was singing all four soprano roles in that magnificent tour de force:

* Here insert Dame Joan singing an extract from the Tales of Hoffman.

In 1954 Joan Sutherland sang for the first time the title role in Aida. At the Royal Opera House she sang Michaela in Carmen - a somewhat smaller version of the Opera than that lately seen in Australia. 1956 was the year that her son Adam, at once our guest and our host tonight, was born. Happily for the world of opera, Adam, squarking and mewling in the nurse's arms, sometimes had to take second place. Five months after his birth Joan was back singing in Le Nozze

di Figaro and Die Zauberflöte.

In 1957 she was ready to take the title role in Alcina. Thus began her venture in the operas of Handel that she has taken such a leading part to revive and to popularise.

* Here insert an extract from Alcina sung by Dame Joan.

LA STUPENDA

But the great moment of her career was at hand. On 17 February 1957 Joan Sutherland sang the title role in Lucia di Lammermoor. It was a stunning success. Tullio Serafin was the conductor. Joan's coach, instructor, supporter and source of encouragement was Richard Bonyngue. From that instant the mad scene became a signature and a symbol for the quality of her voice and the drama which she could bring to her performance. She packed a vocal and dramatic punch that was unique. It became the role most often sung by her in theatres throughout the world. In Italy it earned for her the accolade: "La Stupenda".

* Here insert an extract from Joan Sutherland singing Donizetti's Lucia di Lammermoor - mad scene.

By 1960 Joan Sutherland turned to La Traviata by Verdi. Her first performance at Covent Garden was not a success. She was unwell and the production was dated. But, in the same

year for the first time at the Glyndebourne Festival, she sang I Puritani. It was another triumph. So too was her performance later that year at Covent Garden of Bellini's La Sonnambula. Serafin was again the conductor.

* Here insert extract from La Sonnambula by Bellini.

Joan Sutherland was rising in the world and in national and international recognition. She was made a Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1961; quite an achievement for a young girl who had arrived but 10 years earlier in England. She was on the threshold to becoming, as she was to become, one of the six great voices of the century.

Urged on by Richard Bonyng, she was constantly extending her repertoire, bringing new and brilliant roles to fruition. She began visiting the United States of America, taking Alcina there in 1960. In 1962 she sang Les Huguenots by Meyerbeer at La Scala, Milan in succession to Maria Callas. Callas never displayed to Sutherland the fiery jealousy of the legend. Perhaps the manifest kindness of the Australian Diva earned her respect and affection.

In 1963 Joan sang at the Second Inaugural Salute to President Kennedy. Two years later, for the first time, she sang Marguerite in Gounod's Faust. This was the role in which I first saw her. I remember it so vividly. It was at Her Majesty's Theatre in Sydney. I had been taken there, a

young solicitor, by my law partners. They said to me you must hear this voice. It is one of the great voices of the century. And she is Australian.

I went to the Sutherland Williamson Opera Company's performance. Is it a trick of the memory or do I recall that the clamour, ardour, insistence and love thrown back at the stage from the audience at the end required Marguerite to sing the final trio twice? Twice ascending with the angels, just as Joan took us, heavenward, with her voice:

* Here insert the last trio from Faust with Dame Joan singing Marguerite.

The Sutherland-Williamson tour of Australia just 14 years after her departure was a great inspiration to opera in this country. Notably, she was accompanied on the tour by Pavarotti. Their combined talents inspired the development of the Australian Opera. This gave an artistic reality to Utson's magnificent building at Sydney Cove. An empty shell would have had no life. It would have mocked our antipodean lack of culture. Dame Joan and Richard Bonyngé by their annual pilgrimages to Australia and to Sydney put the Opera House on more than the architectural map. It gave an authentic credibility to music and art in Australia.

By 1969 this notable couple had moved their home to Switzerland. They were neighbours of the fabulous Noël Coward. At one time Dame Joan recorded an album of his brilliant, witty, fragile, lovely, haunting songs:

* Here insert Dame Joan singing a Noel Coward song.

The search for new repertoire went on. In 1967 it was Delibe's opera Lakmé. Later that year it was Donizetti's La Fille du Régiment.

In 1971 another of Donizetti's operas was revived, this time in San Francisco. It was Maria Stuarda. This was a dark period in which Joan Sutherland seemed to delight in playing on the stage women notorious for murder and mayhem. In 1972 she turned her skills to Lucrezia Borgia, a great bel canto role. After 1974 her visits to Australia became a precious annual event for her fellow citizens. When in 1975 the Order of Australia was established, Joan Sutherland added lustre to it by accepting appointment as a Companion. It is still the first in her list of decorations. Richard Bonyngé was honoured in 1977 by his appointment as an Officer of the Order of Australia. And in 1979 Joan Sutherland was elevated by the Queen to be a Dame Commander of the British Empire.

Her life has been full of many honours. The Silver Medal of the Royal Opera. Both she and Richard Bonyngé are Commandeurs des artes et des lettres of the French Republic - an honour conferred on them in 1989.

Life continued on its busy, arduous course. Joan Sutherland described herself as "very Australian - tenacious, dogged, stubborn". "It has to do", she said "with the Scots stock at the back of it". How apt that that stock should be

awarded with the Stupenda of di Lammermoor. Recording became an important vehicle to bring the gifts of her voice to the ears of millions. Television simulcasts attracted the largest audiences ever chronicled in Australia. Opera in the park became her way of bringing her voice to many citizens.

Quaint happenings occurred during her visits to Australia. In 1980 Donald Smith trod on her train and almost toppled her off into the orchestra pit. When she turned 50 she sang duets in San Francisco with Marilyn Horne and later told her audience "That wasn't bad for a couple of old broads". When she was made a Dame, with becoming but wholly sincere modesty, she said "As you all seem to enjoy it so much, I shall stumble on for a few more years". On one occasion the famous American Black Soprano Leontyne Price was cornered in a dressing room by a fan who said "I've been waiting to see you Miss Sutherland all my life. I have all the Joan Sutherland records". Leontyne looked at her coldly. "There must be some terrible mistake. My name is not Joan Sutherland. My name is Beverley Sills!"

DELIVERING THE GOODS

But now the time came to limit the strain of such a heroic, hectic life. Dame Joan told a recent interviewer:

"I can't going on playing 18 year old parts at the age of 63. The voice is still there, but it's that much harder for me to deliver the goods physically. It's just a matter of being sensible about it."

sensible, modest, engaging. At home with the family and unaffected in personal relationships. But underneath it all is a steely voice and a steely determination, by hard work to make the most of a great gift of nature. And how precious is the companion, who through one of life's great chances, perceived the full extent of the gift and the obligation that went with it to extend it and to take it into new realms of musical gold. Out from the choirs and places where once the sweet bird sang to the world at large, busy and distracted.

Sir Yehudi Menuhin in a letter to her after a performance in London told her "I have never heard such beautiful singing - your voice would be the dream of any string player ... every note seemed to carry a warm weight as if your bow arm was drawing the sound out of the vocal chords in a way that makes me feel both inspired and discouraged". The Editor-in-Chief of the New York Metropolitan Opera's magazine, Patrick Smith, talked of her "towering powerful performances". "We have never seen anything like it before in this country and I don't know if we will again. There is no-one who compares to her voice. There was nobody before, there's nobody now. There may be in the future, but it's not likely".

The tributes now pour in. But the one which comes closest to my engagement with Dame Joan is Moffatt Oxenbould's remarks:

"She has set standards and maintained standards. As a model she is a very splendid

one. Her caring and willingness to share what she knows is something all of us in [the Australian Opera] feel very privileged to have been part of."

Caring, natural, diverse, talented, stupendous, hard-working, inspirational, innovative, unique. Mere words do not convey her qualities. Speeches are unworthy of the mysterious call to the spirits that comes with that voice. That voice, which haunts, thrills. That voice in which you can feel confidence and assurance. That voice:

"* Finish with an extract from Bellini's Norma with Dame Joan singing the title role.

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