

Following in the footsteps...

WHEN I WAS A YOUNGSTER, my two great loves in life were aircraft and music. I became an apprentice to Sir Frederick Handley-Page, ending up on the design team.

My hobby had always been music and eventually I changed over to this - having admired my father's beautiful work in concerts, opera, oratorio and recordings.

Only later, when people asked "Why the unusual choices of aircraft and music" - did I realise that because my Grandfather was an engineer I used to talk engineering with him, when my father was always singing. (And we assume we have free choices in life!)

As a child, I had enjoyed visits to Dublin during the Opera season there, and saw his eloquent performances in *Faust*, *Madam Butterfly*, *The Barber of Seville*, *Pagliacci* etc.

Tucked up

My mother tells me that when I was a toddler, I fell asleep in the wings in Dublin, and was tucked up in a prop-basket by Maureen O'Hara. She was dancing in the *Faust* Ballet and was just about to leave for Hollywood!

One evening while I was still a teenager, when my father returned from rehearsal in London, he was still laughing. As we lived 17 miles away, this was clearly extraordinary and we asked him for an explanation.

He said he had been rehearsing 'Messiah' with Sir Thomas Beecham at the Albert Hall. Sir Thomas suddenly stopped everything, saying to the choir. "When we sing the words - "all we like sheep have gone astray" - Could we please have a little more regret, and a little less satisfaction?"

I was lucky enough to win a scholarship to the Guildhall School of Music and studied with that kindly man Norman Walker. (Who, I now realise possessed that rare voice, a lyric Bass).

Simultaneously I studied with my father. He intrigued me one day by saying that his Oratorios were just as important to him as his Operas. He recommended all singers never to neglect their Oratorios - as the drama and declaration would come in very useful when it came to opera.

At the GSM they had a very helpful policy. Before we left, we had the opportunity of trying out our wings in several operas.

Also, during our last year of study, we were sent out to sing little concerts that didn't matter - so that we could get used to being nervous to having to watch the Conductor, and coping when we forgot our words. I was just one of a stream of students

By John Heddle Nash



John Heddle Nash Father (above) and Son (below)



who were sent to sing with a Choral Society in the outskirts of Cardiff. It was my very first concert and I shall never forget it. As the train pulled into Cardiff station the conductor of the Choral Society came up the platform to meet me - a most unusual thing to do. He looked extremely concerned, shook hands in a worried manner and said "Are you John Heddle Nash? "Yes" "Are you in good voice man? "I think so - why?" "The last one was bloody awful!" Music at my father's house in Petts Wood sometimes got complicated. The singing went on for a large portion of the day. Father's dog would howl! So it got many a walk in the woods.

I was fortunate to win the "Queens Prize" - singing Verdi, Mozart and Mendelssohn. This became a happy memory, since it later involved meeting Dr Ralph Vaughan Williams who had a delicious sense of humour. We practiced bowing in the corner to an imaginary Queen Mother before she arrived at the St Cecilia's Day Concert for the Musicians Company Benevolent Fund.

With the Carl Rosa Opera Company, Sadlers Wells and ENOC I sang with Charles Craig, Kenneth McKellar, Ruth Packer and Marie Collier in: *La Boheme*,

Faust, *Pagliacci*, *Carmen*, *Cenerentola*, *Don Pasquale*; also *The Barber of Seville* and *Don Giovanni*. It was during the responsibility of these last two title roles that I realised that virtually everything that my father sang was a title role - from *Faust* to *Gerontius*. He had cheerfully shouldered all those responsibilities throughout his life. Particularly I admired my father's elegant and expressive use of the English language. It was more than just good diction. He could make a word come to life, and by lifting the key word of a sentence, bring the whole phrase to life.

Invitations to sing in France, at Strasbourg EC, Ireland, Denmark, Spain and the Holland Festival were a privilege. There followed a visit to sing as soloist with my life long friends, the Kings Lynn Male Voice Choir, in the Ballroom at Sandringham. Unlike my father's dog, the Corgis were very well behaved and did not howl - nor bite!!

Duets a joy

At Manchester BBC we broadcast 25 different operas, a happy time. And my father and I sang "The Barber of Seville" twice on television.

Singing duets is always a joy. Since each duet has potentially twice the impact of a solo, if only the singers will work together. With father this was hardly a problem, and we included many opera duets in the concerts. (*La Boheme*, *The Pearl Fishers* and the sparkling Supper Duet for *Die Fledermaus*).

Some British conductors, who were sometimes known for their sarcasm treated me gently (on account of my father) and took the trouble to teach me things, for which I shall always be grateful.

I particularly enjoy the memory of making music with Sir Adrian Boult, Sir Charles Groves, Stanford Robinson, Marcus Dodds, Jesus Etcheverry of the Opera Comique and Arthur Fiedler, all of whom had the blessed gift of encouraging one; also Simon Rattle.

The Royal Marines kindly taught me all I know about Military Band Music and working with these gifted musicians is always a joy.

My father died in 1963, and sang his last *Messiah* only 3 months before.

I think he would have been glad that my first joining the Musicians Company was at the instigation of my engineering grandfather - a City man.

When you have a famous father, the world permits you little chance of being pleased with yourself. I don't mind a bit. He set standards which I am still trying to emulate.