

# KATHLEEN FERRIER

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**PHONOGRAPHY** is a rather new phenomenon in music. Its older brother, **Discography**, is better known, having been around rather longer. What are these learned arts which have occupied most of my time for the last three years?

The latter is the organised listing of gramophone records which share a common factor - for example the records of any one Composer, Instrumentalist or Singer. The former is the complete listing which embraces all gramophone and sound recordings including film sound track and compact disc.

In recent years, increasing interest has been shown by enthusiasts in these heavenly twins; articles appearing in collectors' magazines about performing musicians accompanied by lists of their recordings can make fascinating reading. If the records are still available the listening potential can be well imagined!

In 1982, I successfully applied to appear on BBC TV's Mastermind programme. Two specialised subjects are prepared by potential contestants. I selected "The Life and Recordings of Enrico Caruso" and "The life of Kathleen Ferrier" - artists I had long admired. Memorising all Caruso's biographies required 6 months intensive study. The results enabled me to reach the semi final for the four best non-winners. In comparison, the study of Kathleen Ferrier should have been far easier since there was only one accurate biography, written by her sister, Winifrid, and a "Memoir" edited by Neville Cardus. I studied them avidly for a month. Alas! I only obtained 14 points and failed to go through to the final!

## Happy outcome

The surprising and happy outcome was that I received an unexpected letter from Winifrid Ferrier - then unknown to me - to express her appreciation of my efforts. Thereafter we met and became firm friends. Subsequent encounters with Kathleen's friends further stimulated my interest in the story of this lovely, quiet yet energetic good humoured Lancashire woman, possessor of a uniquely beautiful contralto voice, who was so sadly lost in 1953, aged only forty one. Eagerly, I collected her recordings, fascinated by the new issues and the discovery of radio archives around the world taken from her broadcasts. After hearing some of these wonderful performances like Mahler's Second Symphony or Chausson's "Poeme de L'Amour et de La Mer."

I wondered what other forgotten gems lay closetted in libraries and collections. I began looking at the BBC, whose rightly admired sound archive is arguably the world's finest. At the National Sound Archive of the British Library, I discovered some real treasures including from 1945 Kathleen's earliest BBC broadcast to have survived. Other material included vocal works by Rubbra,



Photo: - Decca/Houston Rogers

Maurice Jacobson; Bach's B. Minor Mass and excerpts from Britten's "Rape of Lucretia" in which Kathleen sang at Glyndebourne in 1946. If BBC recordings like these existed from over 40 years ago, what else might reside elsewhere?

The next stage was to advertise my search in "Gramophone". My enquiry brought a few replies about unpublished material. Private enthusiasts had made acetate recordings of unretained broadcasts from the early 1950s. Few in number, their value was great, especially excerpts from the 1952 Edinburgh Festival; part of a recital with Pears & Britten as well as "Four Serious Songs" recorded in New York.

## International search

An international search was then initiated. Notable revelations came from Washington in an unissued Bach song; from Norwegian Radio, a beautiful performance of Brahms' Alto Rhapsody. From nearer home, a recording emerged of Mahler's 3rd Symphony under Sir Adrian Boult. Once the initial excitement had subsided I had to decide what to do with all this new information. Keep it secret? Write about it? Would anyone be interested especially as I had never written a book? What next?

Ultimately, I purchased a word processor, essential equipment. I also spoke to Winifrid Ferrier about my ideas who instantly offered me free access to all her late sister's papers. With such unbridled enthusiasm and support how could I desist from

embarking upon the phonography?

In chronological order, I prepared a list of all Kathleen Ferrier's recordings irrespective of origin. Significantly, the archives of EMI & Decca provided the dates of recording sessions, sometimes the venues, other artists involved and the record numbers on which each work was issued.

From Kathleen's diaries, I could check information about the sessions, confirm dates - even ascertain times at which the recordings were made over 40 years ago. Her collection of memorabilia was remarkable and proved to be of immense assistance in my preparation of biographical notes so that recordings could be seen in the context of her life and career. Several months later, I sought the advice of the celebrated music critic Alan Blyth about publication. A Ferrier enthusiast himself, he directed me to Julia MacRae, the publisher of Dame Janet Baker's book "Full Circle". In some trepidation I visited her office in January 1990 with the initial chapters. An agonising three weeks later, the contract arrived to write my book "Ferrier - A Career Recorded".

## Ideal opportunity

Luckily, in early 1990, Decca Records were making plans to reissue virtually all Kathleen's records on Compact Disc to commemorate the 80th anniversary of her birth. Here was an ideal opportunity for a joint issue - a book about her recordings and the records themselves, including some of those uncovered during my research. Therefore my manuscript had to be complete for the publisher in early 1991. There was an enormous amount of writing and checking to be done and only one way to achieve the target. My application to my employer for six months leave of absence was denied! Consequently, I drew breath, resigned my post and applied myself to my new and absorbing priorities.

## Sustained support

Since September 1990, I have been supported and encouraged by so many people. Family and friends have realised how much this project has meant to me if occasionally questioning my sanity! - while Julia, my publisher and mentor, has remained a tower of strength. Likewise, Winifrid Ferrier has been of immeasurable help, not only in recalling long passed anecdotes of her sister but also in her unfailing hospitality while I studied here sister's letters and diaries.

Kathleen Ferrier has proved an inspiring subject. As Sir John Barbirolli said of her: "Posterity must surely accord her a place of the highest honour".

Note: "Ferrier, A Career Recorded" is to be published in April 1992 by Julia MacRae Books of London.

Decca's 10 CD set of Kathleen Ferrier will be released during this summer.