

Betty Bannerman and the French Song class

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MY FIRST MEMORY, from when I was four or five, of my mother in concert was at my father's Music Club at our home in Buckinghamshire. My last memory of her on stage was a Midday Concert at the RNCM in 1978. Her role then was to speak (not 'declaim') Mallarmé's Symbolist poetry over a symphonic score of Hindemith's *L'Hérodiade* which didn't indicate precisely how words and music were to be interwoven. The conductor, Szymon Goldberg, had once led a string quartet in which Hindemith played the viola. I believe that this broadcast performance of *L'Hérodiade* (composed for Martha Graham in 1944) remains unique in the UK, and it certainly came as something of a shock to the Manchester audience.

For this act of heroism alone, Betty Bannerman deserved the Honorary Fellowship awarded to her by the RNCM in 1981. Thematically related, but contrasted in every other way to the *Hérodiade*, was Delilah's aria 'Amours, viens aider' by Saint-Saëns, which she sang at a Promenade Concert in the Queen's Hall conducted by Sir Henry Wood in 1936, with Constant Lambert's *The Rio Grande* in the second half. No encores were allowed in the first half! (She had given an earlier performance of the Saint-Saëns in 1929 with Frank Bridge conducting, a critic recording that she sang two of Elgar's *Sea Pictures* 'and a familiar air from "Samson and Delilah", the latter with particular understanding'.)



Betty Bannerman, drawn in 1927 by Jack Souter
(by kind permission of Richard Lockett)

Although Betty Bannerman was identified at the Northern School of Music and RNCM with her French Song class, her experience as a soloist was much wider, including German Lieder, Hebridean folk songs and contemporary music such as Arthur Honegger's *Cris du Monde* with Adrian Boult conducting in 1933 (for the BBC). Alan Rawsthorne's *Chamber Cantata*, first performed by her at the Wigmore Hall in 1937 and rediscovered by John Turner, was revived at the RNCM in 2018. The height of Betty's professional career as a soloist was undoubtedly in the 1930s, when she was a soloist in six *St. Mathew Passions*, five *Dreams of Gerontius*, five *Elijahs*, three Bach cantatas and three *Christmas Oratorios*, besides performances of Elgar's *The Kingdom* and *The Apostles*. She was a prolific broadcaster from 1928 onwards, and she was involved in some way with the early days of television.

Performance experience was a very important part of her legacy to students. Expression, she emphasised, was not confined to the voice alone, and a physical connection had also to be made with the audience. She encouraged some students to perform in front of a mirror to understand this! Her 'out of class' advice on repertoire focussed on what was suitable for a particular voice and the level of understanding that the individual had achieved. She could react strongly when she learned of a planned public performance when these conditions could not be met. Many students, even if advanced vocally, at first lacked the language skills that gave access to the texts to be given musical expression.

She also advised on how to shape a concert programme. In her classes and individual teaching she extended the core of the French repertoire: Debussy, Ravel, Fauré, Duparc, Caplet, Roussel, de Séverac, Gounod and Lully ... to Bach, Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, etc. She remained intensely interested in her students' careers, attending their concerts when possible, catching their broadcasts and reporting to them by telephone or letter. Many performers came to her for last-minute fine tuning, either in the music room at Clonterbrook House, Cheshire (her home from 1949), or in London.

The first concerts at Clonterbrook were given by leading artists, often friends, some with international reputations, but from around 1960 preference was given to promoting young professionals, mostly with NSM connections. The performance there of Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ* in 1980, with Michael Hancock as piano-director, was sung by Joan Rodgers, Jeremy Munro, Christopher Underwood and Philip Creasey and reflected the achievement of the French Song class. Providing opportunities for young professionals to perform operatic rôles has been the objective of Betty's son, Jeffery Lockett, at Clonter Opera, gathering momentum in the 1980s.

Betty Bannerman's own musical education was 'continental', beginning with two years in Paris (1921–3) studying with d'Aubigné and ending with Dino Borghioli in London in the 1950s and 1960s (she gave one of her last Wigmore Hall recitals with him). Both these teachers were celebrated for their operatic rôles. Her greatest teacher, Claire Croiza, whom she first heard perform in London in 1928, became the dominant influence in her musical life from 1930, after which she arranged Croiza's 'Cours' (master classes) in London and a concert tour, with BBC engagements, in 1934. This was at some cost to her own career, but gave her the chance of a broadcast concert with Darius Milhaud in 1931. From 1955 Betty battled to re-publish Croiza's recordings, which she achieved in 1970, winning the

Sunday Times Vocal Record of the Year. Betty's translations of Croiza's teaching notes, published in part as *The Singer as Interpreter: Claire Croiza's Master Classes* by Gollancz in 1989, was celebrated with a French Song recital at the RNCM in 1989, given by Joan Rodgers, Vanessa Williamson and Christopher Underwood. These 'Cours' fed directly into Betty's own classes in London and Manchester, and several RNCM students were encouraged to take part in master classes given by Pierre Bernac and Hugues Cuénod, both of whom were to give their classes later at the RNCM. In 1986 Betty Bannerman, with Michael Hancock, gave a 'billed' master class in Halifax with four students from the RNCM.



Betty Bannerman (by kind permission of Jeffery Lockett)

At a Manchester Mid-Day concert in November 1960, she met Borishka Geréb, who invited her to help students with French repertoire in London; Geréb's musical background was Viennese. This was the genesis of a London class (1963) made up of students sent to her by several London-based teachers, which gave birth soon after to the French Song class in Manchester.

The London classes were not held without difficulty, since Betty had no permanent studio there and had to teach in a variety of private houses and hired premises, sometimes moving from one to another on the same day. London and Manchester remained closely linked, and in the 1970s a two or three day visit to London, taking in concerts, opera, museums and exhibitions in addition to class

and individual lessons, could end with a morning lesson in London before taking the train to Crewe, car to Alderley Edge, another train to Manchester, and then attending a Midday Concert, giving a class at the NSM or RNCM and finishing the day with a Hallé concert! Very few days in the year were not filled with face-to-face lessons or used for gathering teaching materials: recordings, scores, relevant texts, etc. The most time-consuming activity, and one fraught with technical hiccups, was making tapes from carefully selected musical extracts. Former pupils will no doubt recall battles with tape recorders and cassette players!

Betty Bannerman's Manchester connections grew from 1951 and a first concert with the Laurance Turner Quartet, a Mid-Day concert featuring Hugo Wolf in 1952, and becoming a member of the BBC Northern Singers in 1954, though this proved too arduous, with around 30 rehearsals or broadcasts in that year alone.

Her connection with Ida Carroll is recorded from 1956, and she gave the first of three talks on Berlioz to NSM students in November 1957 (on *The Damnation of Faust*). I don't know when she became a member of the NSM Council, but I believe she remained until the formation of the Joint Committee in 1967 which created the merger of the two colleges in 1972–3. As a member of the Council she attended prize givings and most major student performances: she heard 'a lovely mezzo' at a NSM prize giving in 1961, who was Alison Hargan, a member of the French Song class from the first, as was Ian Comboy.

Both Ida Carroll and Betty were concerned about the survival of the French Song class, but it flourished after the merger, with the support of existing and valued colleagues such as Irene Wilde, and prospered under Alexander Young (Head of Vocal Studies) and John Manduell. Manduell appreciated the distinction that Betty could bring to the department and in 1974 invited her to teach two classes: Singing, as well as French Song, but she decided that two days a week would be too much for her in her 70s.

The first French Song class was held on 30 September 1965, and the final one in 1980. Christopher Underwood taught a separate class from 1978, to support first-year students, and took on the French Song class itself in 1980, carrying it forward until 1994. During this time, NSM and RNCM students were encouraged to enter national competitions and did so with success. Many seized opportunities to gain further experience elsewhere in the UK and abroad. I will not attempt to list the number of these graduates who have enjoyed successful professional careers over these years: only a few of whom are mentioned *en passant* here.