



## **Marjorie Florence Lawrence (1907–1979)**

A famous singer, Marjorie was born at Deans Marsh on February 17, 1907, the fifth of the six children of William Lawrence and his wife Elizabeth, nee Smith, who died when Marjorie was two years old. All the family were musical and were prominent in many successful entertainments in Deans Marsh and Winchelsea. Marjorie starred in these and her father wished her to continue with her singing. Rev. Pearce, the minister of Deans Marsh Church of England who directed the musical activities of the area, was her first singing teacher and encouraged her to take her singing seriously.

At the age of eighteen, she went to Melbourne and took lessons from Ivor Boustead, previously John Brownlee's teacher. He was so impressed by her singing that he entered her in the Geelong Competitions, prophesying in a letter to her father that she would win. She won every event she entered, including the Geelong sun aria.

In October 1928 Marjorie took ship to Europe to study with Cecilie Gilly, her father agreeing to subsidize the lessons. Five years later she made a triumphant debut at the Paris Opera. During this period of hard work and study she boarded with the Grodet family from who she learned French language and culture. At Deans Marsh she had learned the cantatas of Bach and the oratorios of Handel and Mendelssohn as a contralto, but Cecilie Gilly extended her voice upward into the dramatic soprano range. A few concerts and a successful appearance at Monte Carlo Opera where she sang the role of Elizabeth in Tannhauser in 1932 made her name known. At an audition for the Paris Opera she sang one of Ortrud's arias from Lohengrin and in this opera made her debut with that company. Her repertoire, 25 major roles in four languages, expanded rapidly in Wagnerian and Richard Strauss works; by the end of 1934 she was among the highest paid artists on the opera stage. The New York Metropolitan, Vienna Staatsoper and Covent Garden were all anxious to use her talents. In 1935 she accepted many offers and travelled to New York. Her brother Cyril had been her supporter when she first went to Melbourne and he came to Paris when her career took off. He was her manager from then on.

Marjorie's success in New York was sensational, the highlight being her exit on horseback as Brunhilde in *Gotterdammerung*. She also danced the Dance of the Seven Veils in *Salome*. In all the critiques and commentaries mention is made of her vitality, energy and dramatic expression. Wherever she performed, there were rave reviews. She was in demand everywhere for broadcasts, concerts and opera.

In 1941 Marjorie was engaged to sing in *Die Walkure* in Mexico City and while there fell victim to Poliomyelitis which was not immediately diagnosed. Her husband took her to Hot Springs, Arkansas, for treatment, and then to Minneapolis to put her in the care of Sister Kenny. The disease had most affected her in the legs. About two years later her reappearance on the stage was popularly greeted; with a collapsible wheelchair for concerts and opera productions where she sat, lay or reclined, it seemed that the public were still to have their Marjorie Lawrence.

In 1944 she visited troops in Australia, occupied Europe (1944, 1948) and Vietnam (1966). In 1951 she sang the part of Amneris in *Aida* with Gertrude Johnson's opera group in Melbourne, sitting and being brought on and off stage in a chair carried by liveried servants on their shoulders. Her arms and head were so emphatically used in gestures and dramatic emphases that the immobility of her legs went mostly unnoticed.

In the 1950's she took positions at universities in southern Illinois and Arkansas; she ran summer workshops and sponsored children's opera at her home at Hot Springs. Grateful students established the Marjorie Lawrence Lincoln Endowment Fund to enable handicapped people to attend performances at the Lincoln Centre, New York.

Marjorie Lawrence received the Cross of the Legion d'Honneur for her work in France in 1946 and the Companion of the British Empire in 1976. She died of heart failure on January 13, 1979, at Little Rock, Arkansas, survived by her husband, Thomas King, whom she had married on March 29, 1941 at New York. They had no family.

*Written by Ruth Hill who consulted B. and F. Mackenzie Singers of Australia, Lansdowne 1967; Australian Dictionary of Biography, Vol. 10; M. Lawrence, Interrupted Melody, Invincible Press 1949; J. Cargher, Opera and Ballet in Australia, Cassel 1977.*