A national treasure

Myra Hess was at the height of her career when she started the series of morale-boosting wartime concerts at the National Gallery that brought her lasting fame. Inge Kjemtrup tells the tale

When Myra Hess decided in 1939 to cancel what would have been her biggest-ever U.S. tour, her American manager, Annie Friedberg, was aghast. The English pianist had a huge following in the United States, in no small part due to Friedberg's dogged efforts. How could Hess disappoint her American fans just to run a concert series at the National Gallery in London? It's unlikely Friedberg's annoyance was lessened by the following telegram from Kenneth Clark, the Gallery's director: 'Understand that you do not quite realise the importance of the concerts in the National Gallery by Miss Myra Hess which have been attended by over 10,000 people including the Queen and the Chancellor, and have already become a national institution.'

Today, Hess and her National Gallery concerts are so much the stuff of Blitz-spirit legend that it's difficult to imagine that anything (other than perhaps a Nazi bomb) could have kept her from the concerts. When war was declared in September 1939, London's halls were shuttered and large public gatherings prohibited. The Gallery concerts kept live performances going, provided work to musicians, and raised funds for the Musicians Benevolent Fund. But other benefits lasted longer. 'People who went to her concerts get tears in their eyes when they talk about it,' says Suzanne Bosman, author of *The National Gallery in Wartime*. 'It made quite an impression. When you think you're going to be blown to bits, your senses are heightened.'

At the war's start, Hess was at the peak of her career. Born in 1890 to a German-Jewish textile manufacturing family in London, she was the youngest and the most musical of four siblings, though thankfully not, she would say later, a prodigy. She was talented enough to win a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music and to audition, aged 13, for the distinguished teacher Tobias Matthay with Beethoven's 'Moonlight' Sonata.

She said of her studies with Matthay, 'I had a startling awakening to all the beauties of music of which I had not even dreamed... Till then I had just played; now I began to think.' As Marian McKenna writes in her biography of Hess, 'Matthay taught her how to focus an inherent but undisciplined music instinct, to develop a mind which, by her own admission, "very much needed developing", and thus to build solidly on a sure foundation.' Matthay wasn't fanatical about exercises (though he assigned her Czerny studies) nor did he insist that his pupils memorise their music. What was important to him, Hess wrote, 'was the integrity of a perfor-

Top: © Imperial War Museum (D140); bottom: Myra Hess circa 1942, courtesy Libbie Foster, née Hess (P4179)

mance, its intrinsic musical value.' Bach played a central role in Matthay's teaching, as it would in Hess's own teaching (her pupils Stephen Kovacevich and Yonty Solomon were asked to learn a prelude and Fugue each week.) Some wondered if Matthay made his pupil famous or if her fame made him. Hess did her best to dispel the latter notion: 'The turning point in my career came... when I began to study with Tobias Matthay, whom I consider the greatest inspirational teacher I know of,' she said.

Hess made her London debut in 1907 at the Queen's Hall, (which was completely destroyed by bombs in the Second World War). In the manner of the exhaustive, and exhausting, concerts of the period, she played the fourth piano concertos of both Beethoven and Saint-Saëns, as well as Chopin's F sharp minor Nocturne and Brahms' E flat Intermezzo. 'A new star has arisen in the musical world, whose light should shine brilliantly for many years to come,' wrote one captivated critic. Two months later, she made her recital debut at the Aeolian Hall; one year later she made her first appearance at the Proms, in a Liszt concerto.

Reviews were encouraging, but success was not immediate. For several years, Hess would save her money to present an annual concert, while making her living from teaching. Around this time she made a painful break from her family and decided to live on her own, an uncommon decision for a woman then.

Her US debut in 1922 was sparsely attended: 66 people in New York's 1,200-seat Aeolian Hall. But what the audience lacked in numbers, it made up for in enthusiasm. As McKenna notes, this concert marked the beginning of 'a love affair with American audiences that lasted until the end of her career'. Still, this didn't count for much with Friedberg when faced with the loss of her star attraction in 1939. Hess wrote her, 'I beg you to consider the significance of this war. We are facing the annihilation of everything we hold important, and this wonderful opportunity to give spiritual solace to those who are giving all to combat the evil seems, in some mysterious way, to have been given into my hands. If I betrayed this trust I feel that my own integrity and the future of my art would inevitably suffer.' Friedberg conceded defeat.

The concerts begin

When war began, Hess volunteered for the ARP (Air Raid Precautions). According to McKenna, Hess was visiting friends, and spoke about bringing chamber music to the public 'as an antidote to weariness'. One friend proposed using the National Gallery, now emptied of paintings in anticipation of bombings. Suzanne Bosman tells a slightly different version of this story. Hess, she says, had decided to become an ambulance driver ('she was quite a zippy driver'), but before she did so, 'she decided to invite some of her friends and have a tea party where she'd play for one last time.' She played, and her audience told her that she must give concerts – and why not use the National Gallery?

Whatever the specifics, Hess's timing was perfect. Kenneth Clark, having supervised the transport of the Gallery's treasures to Wales, was at loose ends. What was the purpose of an empty museum in wartime? When Hess proposed the idea of a concert series, he accepted with surprising alacrity. One concert a week wouldn't be enough, he said. 'Why not give one every day?'

Once Gallery trustees and the Home Office gave their approval, planning for the first concert began in earnest. Concerts would take place in the Barry Rooms every weekday at 1pm, with a repeat at 5pm on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Ticket prices would be modest and one-third of the profits would go to the Musicians Benevolent Fund (then as now, the MBF supports ill and ageing music professionals). The concert was advertised by handbills and in newspapers. Steinway loaned a concert grand, chairs were found, and volunteer ushers and ticket-sellers engaged for the first concert on 10 October 1939.

'Everybody was very busy during the war and there was nobody to tell the people that this sort of music was over their heads. So they came and liked it' - Myra Hess

Hess decided to give the first performance in case no one came. But her fears were baseless. Outside the Gallery, an enormous queue had formed, and when the doors opened at 12.30pm, ticket-sellers were nearly trampled. The capacity crowd heard Hess play Scarlatti, Chopin, Schubert, Brahms, Beethoven's 'Appassionata' Sonata and the piece that became her trademark: her arrangement of Bach's *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*. The concert was an undeniable success.

And successful is what the concerts remained, up until the very last one on 10 April 1946. The war caused logistical difficulties, of course. There were also noisy disruptions: the rustling sounds of concert-goers eating lunch (a profitable canteen was set up to feed patrons before a concert); the ringing bells of St Martin-in-the-Fields (a ban on ringing church bells solved that problem); parades and assemblies on Trafalgar Square; the Blitz (concerts were relocated to a fortified basement); and V1 and V2 rockets (on one occasion, Hess made an exaggerated crescendo during a Schubert impromptu to cover the sound of a bomb whizzing overhead). ▶

After the first few weeks, it became clear that arranging seven concerts a week was too much for Hess, who was also giving concerts elsewhere. She called in trustworthy associates, including Anita Gunn, who later became her private secretary, and the composer Howard Ferguson. Ferguson, Bosman explains, 'did a lot of the donkey work', planning programmes and, with agents Ibbs and Tillett, finding and engaging the performers.

The performers ranged from the young and upcoming to more established artists – pianists included Denis Matthews, Gina Bachauer and Moura Lympany. They generally played the meat-and-potatoes German and Austrian repertoire – Bach, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann – repertoire that was also Hess's own. Significantly, says Bosman, German culture was not shunned during the Second World War, as it had been in the First. A famous anecdote has the German singer Elena Gerhardt begging Hess to cancel her German lieder recital after the Nazis had taken Holland. McKenna writes, 'Sensing her lack of ease, the audience gave her a specially warm welcome – "such an ovation," in Myra's phrase, that it was quite a few minutes before she could attempt to sing.'

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-Suzanne Bosman, National Gallery

At the National Gallery concerts, Hess found her ideal audience. She said later, 'Everybody was very busy during the war and there was nobody to tell the people that this sort of music was over their heads. So they came and liked it.'

Aftermath

Once the war was over in Europe in May 1945, the question arose as to whether the Gallery concerts would continue. There was a brief reprieve, but inevitably, the Gallery wanted to return its focus to the visual arts. The end, when it came, was awkward, with the trustees publicly announcing Hess's resignation in April 1946 – before she had made this decision herself. Bosman comments, 'Kenneth Clark was no longer the director then. If he had been, it would have finished graciously.'

Even while the concerts were still taking place, Hess's transformation into 'national treasure' was well under way. In 1941 she was given the order of Dame Commander of the British Empire (DBE), which entitled her to be known as 'Dame Myra Hess' (she said she never got used to this) and she was also given a Royal Philharmonic Society medal.

Her student Stephen Kovacevich, now a world-renowned pianist himself, feels that the effect of all this praise was to make Hess 'overexposed and taken for granted' in her homeland. He says, 'In Britain, they knew she was a great musician, but they forgot that she was such a fiery player. In the US she was freed from that royal family image.' The California-born Kovacevich came to London to study with Hess after hearing her play in San Francisco. Echoing Hess's comments about Matthay, Kovacevich says of his two years with Hess, 'It was the making of me artistically.'

Hess died in 1965. In the year after her death, an award in her memory was established by the Myra Hess Trust. Beginning with £100, the fund by 1968 had reached £2,400 (£300,000 in today's money). The annual award, administered by the MBF, is given to an outstanding British piano student who is planning to study for a post-graduate degree. Past recipients include Paul Lewis and Joanna MacGregor.

Last autumn, several recipients of the award played at the Gallery as part of Myra Hess Day, an annual event launched five years ago. 'The whole idea is the legendary series was never commemorated by events in the actual place,' says pianist and series artistic director Piers Lane. Former Hess students have featured in the concerts, notably the late Yonty Solomon (Lane's teacher), Kovacevich and the Contiguglia brothers piano duo (they played a duet by Howard Ferguson).

For the 2008 event, Lane commissioned composer Nigel Hess, Myra Hess's great nephew, to write a work based on *Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring*. In 2009 Hess wrote a words-and-music event based on his great-aunt's words, which were read by actress Patricia Routledge as Lane played pieces for which Hess was famous. 'Members of the audience were in tears,' recalls Lane.

This year's Myra Hess Day falls on 5 October and will feature violinist Ida Haendel, who, impressively enough, appeared on the original series. Following Haendel's performance, Lane will interview her and Kovacevich. The evening programme is devoted to chamber music, including Britten's Canticle III 'Still Falls the Rain'.

Myra Hess made several successful post-war tours of the US and her fame endures through the Dame Myra Hess Memorial Concert Series in Chicago. Friedberg need not have feared that Hess would lose her connection to her American audience.

Hess's idealism still moves us today. She once said, 'People are at last realising the true value of things. Music is more than a pleasure – it is one of the greatest achievements of mankind, and in wartime I think people feel the urgency of being reminded of constant things – such as the arts.' ■

For details on the concert, and the National Gallery in Wartime book and DVD, visit www.nationalgallery.org.uk/myra-hess-concerts

Previous page: Queue outside the Gallery before a concert

This page, from top left: Hess addresses an audience; bomb damage at the Gallery, October 1941; a recent Myra Hess Day concert