



NATIONAL TREASURE

Acclaimed British concert pianist Dame Myra Hess, who died 50 years ago, became a wartime hero through her morale-raising recitals at London's National Gallery. *Nick Forton* looks back on her colourful life



London, 1940. The Blitz. Black and white images etched on the nation's collective consciousness: the dome of St Paul's surrounded by smoke and flames; the King and Queen visiting the bombed ruins of the East End; Myra Hess in a fur coat playing the piano at the National Gallery. Pictures which all said the same thing: defiance. Dame Myra, as she became in 1941, was an unlikely hero – classical music's Dame Vera Lynn – and a much-cherished symbol of British indomitability. The National Gallery Concerts defined her every bit as much as her keyboard arrangement of *Jesu, joy of man's desiring*, one of the most beloved of all piano recordings.

Half a century after her death, Myra Hess is far from forgotten. Yet what do we know about the woman behind the photographs, the recordings and the grainy archive film of her playing her Bach transcription or the opening movement of Beethoven's 'Appassionata' Sonata?

In two early portraits aged nine and 15 she is striking looking rather than beautiful. The

familiar image of her is in later life when she had grown rather stout, her hair, with a centre parting, 'arranged in two shallow scallops on her forehead,' as her friend Joyce Grenfell described it, 'and drawn back into a bun at the back'. In these pictures she appears austere and dowdy in ankle-length black dresses with a white blouse her only concession to softer femininity, a sombre and conservative fashion plate, and the epitome of dignity and composure. This was in sharp contrast to the offstage persona. Myra Hess (or 'Hyra Mess' as she sometimes referred to herself) had an irrepressible sense of humour. Laughter and japes were never far away and in her few extant interviews you can hear that, apart from a most beautiful and musical speaking voice, she had a deliciously smoky, mischievous chuckle, much like that of the present-day actress Dame Judi Dench.

'There were times,' recalled her friend Irene Scharrer, 'when we were overcome with



giggles.' Scharrer (1888-1971), two years older than Myra, was a fellow student with her at the Royal Academy of Music under Tobias Matthay, their adored 'Uncle Tobs', who exercised an enduring influence on them. The two women became inseparable. 'Hers was the most brilliant wit I have ever known,' wrote Scharrer, 'with an almost

infectious delight in nonsense. She would sing that terrible song "The Rosary" in a rich, plummy contralto voice, a semitone flat throughout... And then her singing of "The Jewel Song" from Gounod's *Faust*, while I tinkled out her accompaniment on the piano, was never to be forgotten.'

Julia Myra Hess was born on 25 February 1890 in affluent Hampstead, the youngest of four children of Orthodox Jewish parents. Aged seven, she became the youngest child ever to receive a certificate from Trinity College of Music. From there she studied at the Guildhall before winning a scholarship




WARMLY REGARDED:
Hess rehearses in 1943; (far left)
St Paul's Cathedral in the Blitz; the
King and Queen survey the bombed
East End; the young Hess

to the RAM. For her London debut in 1907, she played the Fourth Piano Concertos of both Beethoven and Saint-Saëns conducted by Thomas Beecham, a self-promoted concert which led nowhere (Hess, incidentally, as she habitually did at this time, played her own cadenzas in the Beethoven, though these were later destroyed by her). By no means daunted, she organised two recitals at Aeolian Hall in early 1908. Though well received, it would be another decade and more before her career was firmly established.

In an interview with John Amis three years before her death, she recalled making her Albert Hall debut in 1908 playing Liszt's E flat Concerto: 'I had the large fee of three guineas!' The conductor was Henry Wood and it was the first of many occasions on which they would perform together. 'He was wonderful, so kind. I remember once playing the Mozart D minor Concerto with him. I was still very young and I took a wrong turning in the first movement and thought, "Well, that's the end of my career. He'll never engage me again." I came off the platform and

apologised profoundly. "My dear," he said, "that was nothing. You might have gone into the wrong movement. Then we'd have had some fun!" Myra Hess made 95 appearances at the Proms, playing in every season but one (1946) from 1916 until 1961, sometimes engaged for as many as four concerts.


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From her teenage years, Hess played with many famous conductors (including Willem Mengelberg) and star soloists such as Fritz Kreisler, Nellie Melba, Joseph Szigeti and Lotte Lehmann as well as giving two-piano performances with Irene Scharrer (a bigger name at this time and who had made her first recording back in 1905). In 1922 Myra made the first of no fewer than 40 visits to America

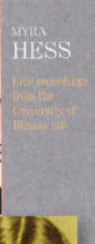
— she would often remain for three or four months at a time, so popular did she become there — and it was in New York in December 1927 that she first entered the recording studio (Schubert's B flat Trio with her friends Jelly d'Arányi and Felix Salmond). Just a few days later in January 1928 she cut her first solo commercial discs, including the earliest of the three she made of *Jesu, joy* (as she called it).

Her fame grew during the 1920s and '30s but one aspect of her life remains a blank. There seems never to have been a significant other, male or female, though rumours persisted. In the 1920s there was a falling out with Harriet Cohen over the affections of Arnold Bax; later there was a series of devoted female travelling companions and secretaries, and a close friendship with the (gay) composer Howard Ferguson. But of whatever her private life consisted, she kept it out of the public gaze.

Throughout the 1930s, Hess played around 100 concerts a year in Britain, Europe and America — except in 1934 when, unknown to the public, she was diagnosed with fibrocystic breast disease and, on the recommendation ▶

MYRA HESS

Her essential recordings



IN LATER LIFE, Hess professed not to like her own recordings (like many other artists she detested the process). 'They bore me to death,' she said, admitting that if she heard one being played on the radio she 'quite liked bits of *Carnaval* and Beethoven's Op. 109'.

These are, indeed, special highlights of her discography. Others include Beethoven's Op. 110 Sonata, Franck's *Variations symphoniques* (with Basil Cameron) and Schumann's *Études symphoniques*. The latter was a favourite of Myra's teacher Tobias Matthey, who noted that the work had been dedicated to William Sterndale Bennett, his first composition teacher.


Among the shorter works are some delicious Scarlatti sonatas and late Brahms, Rudolph Ganz's transcription of Schubert's *Rosamunde* ballet music, *Jesu*, joy of course and – among the works she recorded at her last session in 1957 – a superb account of Granados's *The Maiden and the Nightingale*.

Some of Hess's admirers think she is heard at her best in live performances, such as those from the University of Illinois in 1949 and broadcasts from 1937 (APR 7306 on 3 CDs). But it is her studio discs that present a treasure trove of varied repertoire and where a generous spirit, a delight in music-making and the warm, singing tone common to all Matthey pupils are always much in evidence. Her complete solo and concerto studio recordings (1928-57) are available in a five-CD set on APR (APR7504).

of her American doctor, underwent a double mastectomy. She was now at the very heart of British musical life (she was appointed CBE in 1936). When war was declared, all theatres, cinemas and concert halls were closed, so when Hess's friend Denise Lassimonne suggested putting on concerts in the National Gallery, Myra was well placed to approach the director, Sir Kenneth Clark. He enthusiastically agreed to daily lunchtime concerts there. Myra gave the first one (10 October 1939) and a queue of 1,000 formed to hear her (the Home Office had given permission for an audience of just 200). She played a programme of composers to whom she was closest: Scarlatti, Bach, Beethoven,

Schubert, Chopin and Brahms (she later dropped Chopin from her repertoire).

Designed to lift the morale of the general public living through the privations of war, the National Gallery Concerts charged one shilling admission (profits went to The Musicians' Benevolent Fund) and each artist, regardless of age or fame, was paid the same fee of five guineas. Myra's aim was to present first-rate chamber music at an affordable price as well as giving up-and-coming young musicians the opportunity


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to perform with established artists. It was she who set the agenda. At one memorable concert on New Year's Day 1940, nine well-known pianists played musical chairs in Schumann's *Carnaval* followed by Haydn's 'Toy' Symphony conducted by Sir Kenneth, with Elena Gerhardt (toy drum), Benno Moiseiwitsch (triangle) and Irene Scharrer and Myra Hess (cuckoos).

The National Gallery Concerts continued until April 1946, a total of 1,698 in all. Hess, amazingly, played at 146 of them. Despite the dangers, the bombs and funding problems, there was not a single cancellation. Like the girls at the Windmill Theatre a short distance away, Dame Myra could claim 'We Never Closed'.

After the war she moved the short distance from 8, Carlton Hill in St John's Wood, London, to Cavendish Close and a house

backing on to Lord's Cricket Ground. Her great-nephew, the composer Nigel Hess, remembers his visits there as a small boy and the lawn cut in the shape of a grand piano lid. 'She said to me that she loved living there because when she heard the applause at the end of each cricket over it reminded her of the applause she used to get at her concerts.'

In the post-war decades, Dame Myra had a number of debilitating illnesses which, cumulatively, must have taken their toll: hepatitis, an emergency operation to remove her gall-bladder, a coronary thrombosis in 1960 and then arthritis. She retired in 1961 – her last public performance was with Sir Adrian Boult and the LPO playing Mozart's A major concerto, K488. Her final years were not happy. Unable to play in public any longer, she suffered from depression. Life, in the words of Howard Ferguson, 'became a desert, and each morning brought anew the fearful problem of how in the world she was going to get through the next day.' She died of a heart attack on 25 November 1965.

Her pianistic legacy lives on in a few pupils, now distinguished pianists themselves: Stephen Kovacevich, Richard and John Contiguglia and the late Yonty Solomon who in turn taught Piers Lane. It is Lane who, with the actress Patricia Routledge, presents an entertainment written by Nigel Hess about his great aunt entitled *Admission One Shilling*. Every Wednesday lunchtime in the Preston Bradley Hall of the Chicago Cultural Center (and broadcast live on WMFT radio) there is a free Dame Myra Hess Memorial Concert. And since 2007, the National Gallery has staged an annual Dame Myra Hess Day supported by The Ernest Hecht Charitable Foundation. Not many pianists can boast such accolades 50 years after their death. ■



MUSICAL PORTRAITS:
Myra Hess conducting
at the National Gallery
in 1945, opposite Jacob
Epstein's bust of her