

Manx Singers and the BBC

by Maurice Powell

Norah Moore

This is the second in an occasional series of articles about notable Manx-born singers who broadcast on BBC radio. Norah Moore* was one of the few to enjoy a professional career beyond the shores of 'the lil' Island', who featured in no less than twenty-three radio programmes between 1927 and 1952; the others being Jean Curphey, a popular concert artiste and frequent broadcaster between 1957 and 1964, and Margaret Curphey, the Isle of Man's only true opera singer, who featured in twenty-five broadcasts between 1965 and 1987.** A generation earlier, Norah's career in many ways foreshadowed that of Jean Curphey's in so much as they had similar repertoires in common: popular operatic and operetta arias, songs from popular musical shows, and Manx songs. After World War II Norah devoted herself to teaching, theatrical producing on the Island and to her successful business career.

* Norah Kathleen Moore (1906-93) was the daughter of Noah Moore, the highly regarded teacher, singer, choir trainer and, after World War I, the manager of the Villa Marina, and Sarah Quayle. She had one sibling, a brother, Arthur Quayle Moore, a journalist, and perceptive commentator on Island life during the heyday of the tourist industry. She never married.

** See Maurice Powell, articles about the careers of *Jean Curphey* and *Margaret Curphey*, manxmusic.com

There are just two brief references to Norah Moore in the local newspapers before World War I: in the *Mona's Herald* of 13th April 1910 after she was placed 8th in a children's competition to collect the largest number of halfpennies for Lady Raglan's Hospital Cot Scheme - she amassed a total of 70 - for which she received a silver cup. The second occasion was also mentioned in the *Herald*, on 20th April 1914, after she took part in a Dancing Display and Exhibition given by the pupils of the Misses Rowe School of Dancing at the Kursaal (the original name of the Villa Marina before World War I), and, at just eight years of age, was said to be 'step perfect'.

During the war Norah took part in several local Eisteddfods (in 1916 she was placed 1st in a girls' vocal class solo for those under twelve years of age), Matinee Dansants, fancy dress carnivals, fund raising entertainments for the Manx Disabled Soldiers' and Sailors' Fund, 'clogs and clothing' for poor school children, and 'for the sake of the soldiers'. At one entertainment in 1917 she and Doris Lowthian performed a 'coon' song and dance; at another event both girls received a special mention for raising £7 2s 6d from a miniature sale of work. In March 1919 she received only her second mention in the local newspapers as a singer when she appeared at a YMCA concert with the Dinkums concert party where she sang a solo and joined in a duet.

In August 1917 Norah passed the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music elementary division piano examination, a pupil of Miss Gelling, and in 1919 she passed the ABRSM lower division piano examination as a pupil of Mrs Arnold Kermode. That year she also took part in the Manx Music Festival and was unofficially placed 5th in the girls' solo

class with 49 marks, and 3rd in the piano sight-reading class for entrants under the age of fifteen. Norah passed the Elementary Division piano examination in 1921, and in 1922, at the age of sixteen, was the first prize winner in the Manx Music Festival open class. Norah also appeared twice with the 'Islanders Concert Party' in their 'New 1923 Entertainment' organised by Noah Moore at Marown after a ploughing competition, and at the Gaiety Theatre, when twenty-six numbers 'culled from the vaudeville basket' were 'rendered efficiently'.

The Baume Scholarship and the Royal Academy of Music

On 10th January 1924 Norah Moore became the 6th recipient of the Baume Scholarship to study music for three years at the Royal Academy of Music, London. She later confided that it was for her 'promise rather than performance' that she won the award which led to her studying under Edward Iles at the Academy, and with Dawson Freer – the author of *The Teaching of Interpretation in Song* - privately, as a lyric coloratura soprano. She was subsequently awarded the LRAM diploma.

We next hear of Norah in August 1926* when she made her debut at the Villa Marina together with the eminent tenor Joseph Hislop on Sunday September 5th before a large audience near the end of a mediocre season. She sang Debussy's scène lyrique *L'Enfant Prodigue* in a voice that was 'not strong, but beautifully sweet (and) with perfect enunciation'. In the second half she sang songs by Brahms, Hageman and Walter Rummel, acquiesced to two encores and gave a performance of Bantock's *Lament of Isis* from *Songs of Egypt* after which she was presented with seven bouquets of flowers and a large box of chocolates. In November that year she appeared as the guest soloist at a London Manx Society dinner; the chairman was '...greatly impressed' and predicted that '... you have before you a brilliant future'.**

* See *Ramsey Courier* 27.08.1926, and photograph.

** Norah returned to the Villa Marina on Sunday July 10th 1927 together with Joseph Hislop and sang arias and songs by Meyerbeer, Puccini and Parry amongst others before '... a splendid audience in brilliant weather'. She '... created a very good impression by the cultured way she sang' with a 'splendid technique (and) a voice improved in range and power since her last appearance' at the Villa Marina.

Norah 'on air'

Norah Moore's first radio broadcast was a London Manx Society concert of Manx National Music from London and the Daventry relay station between 7.45 and 8.30 pm on Wednesday May 18th 1927. The London Manx Choir was joined by Ada Mylchreest, the Island's foremost contralto; Norah sang *Hush*, *Little Darling*, *The Fushia Tree* (or *What if the fowler my blackbird has stolen* arranged by Quilter) and *The Maid of Port-y-Shee*. The local newspaper reporter commented that 'the wireless failed to do justice to her magnificent voice'.

Norah took part in a further twenty-two broadcast concerts during the next two decades.* Here are some of the highlights of her broadcasting career:

* See *BBC Programme Index* online.

During 1937 and 1938 Norah participated in three editions of 'From Stage to Screen'* on the Northern Regional Programme with the BBC Northern Orchestra, including selections from *Lilac Time*, Novello's *Careless Rapture*, Coward's *Bitter Sweet*, Lehar's *Paganini*, *Some Day My Prince Will Come* from *Snow White* and the 'Donkey Duet' *Come Here, Come There*, from Messenger's *Veronique*. She was described in the *Radio Times* as '... a native of the Isle of Man ... (a) lyric, opera and oratorio soprano'. According to the *Times* critic the cantata is replete with 'virile male choruses, gentle female choruses, stately mixed chorus and brilliant solos for the soprano, tenor and baritone'.

* Tuesday 27th July 1937, conductor Arnold Perry; Saturday 20th August 1938, conductor Alfred Baker; Thursday 29th September 1938, conductor H. Foster Clark.

On Thursday 28th April 1938 a large-scale choral work 'of outstanding merit' was broadcast from the Palace Ballroom at 8.00 pm on the Northern Regional Programme: the cantata *The Legend of Man* by local composer and cinema organist of genius Dr George Tootell* at the 47th Annual Manx Music Festival concert. At the time it was the most ambitious dramatic work ever conceived about the history of the island. The soloists were Norah Moore, soprano, Douglas Buxton, tenor, and Stuart Robinson, baritone, with the combined Manx Choirs and the Festival Orchestra, leader Louis Cohen, conducted by the composer himself. Norah's contribution was deemed 'exquisite'.

* Dr George Tootell FRCO devised the story, wrote the libretto and composed the music. Although there are no authentic Manx traditional melodies in the work, many of the themes are reminiscent of traditional Manx folk melodies. The orchestra numbered 42 and the choir 120 according to the *Isle of Man Times*, 30.04.1938. Tootell's other large-scale works include the opera, *The Lure of Isis* and the children's operetta *Peggy and the Pixies*.

A selection of songs from Romberg's *The Student Prince* featured in a broadcast concert entitled 'From the First Act' on Sunday 21st May 1939, with the BBC Northern Orchestra conducted by Arthur Spencer, in which Norah was joined by the tenor A. Bell Walker and the Grosvenor Singers.

In 1941, during World War II, Norah appeared on three occasions in the Forces Programme, twice in the series 'Britain and its Music'* and once in Jack Hardy's series 'Little Orchestra'.** In the first programme she was joined by the Halle Chorus; the second programme featured selections from the music of Rudolf Friml, and for the third programme entitled 'Songs of Ellan Vannin' she acted as *commère* introducing soloists Dorothy Pearce, soprano, and baritone Dale Smith.

* Wednesday 12th February 1941, conducted by Arthur Spencer; Wednesday June 25th 1941, compered by Arthur Spencer.

** Wednesday 12th February 1941.

Norah appeared with Toni and the North Pier Orchestra, Blackpool, 'for the holiday makers and the folks at home' on Sunday 1st September 1946, at 8.15 pm on the Light Programme, with music by Puccini (*One Fine Day* from *Madame Butterfly*), Cole Porter's *In the still of the Night* and melodies from Noel Coward's *Bitter Sweet*.*

* She appeared again with Toni on Thursday 17th March 1949, at 4.25 pm on the Light Programme, this time with the Northern Variety Orchestra, although programme details were not listed in the Radio Times.

During 1947 and 1950 Norah appeared three times on the Light programme and once on the Home Service. In May 1947 she sang a scena from Tchaikovsky's *Joan of Arc* with the BBC Northern Orchestra conducted by Charles Groves. In August 1948 (repeated at the end of the month) and April 1950 she appeared in the series 'Bandstand' with the Fairey Aviation and Black Dyke Mills brass bands, and contributed arias by Donizetti and Meyerbeer, and songs by Rubens, Edward German, Dvorak's *Songs My Mother Taught Me* and *A Thousand Beautiful Things* by Haydn Wood. In December 1950 she appeared once more with Jack Hardy and his Little Orchestra, and sang Elgar's *Shepherd's Song*, Cyril Scott's *the Blackbird's Song*, and two Manx songs: the *Spinning Wheel Song* and *Mylecharine* arranged by Jack Hardy.

* Tuesday 12th December 1950, 11.00 on the Home Service.

Norah Moore's final broadcast took place on Thursday 28th August 1952 at 6.00 pm on the Light Programme in the series 'Bandstand', with the Black Dyke Mills brass band conducted by Alex Mortimer. She sang Tchaikovsky's *Song Without Words*, Grieg's *I Love Thee* and Montague Phillips *Song of the Smuggler's Lass*.

A much-loved local personality

Norah Moore's career was a varied one. During the 1930s she sang with Sadler's Wells opera chorus, took on a number of smaller roles and understudied the great Joan Cross. She worked with Tyrone Guthrie at the Old Vic Company and was a member of the cast for Edward German's *Merry England* at the Prince's Theatre, London, which ran for over a year before touring the provinces. During the war she worked for the Red Cross on the Island and took part in many wartime concerts. In 1945 she performed a selection of Manx songs before King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in the gardens of Government House, and afterwards was presented to the Royal couple. She regarded this occasion as the highlight of her career.

Norah returned to England and continued her career as a concert artiste, appeared on BBC's *Children's Hour* and sang in *Die Fledermaus* (Rosalinda) and *La Boheme* (Mimi) at Sadlers' Wells. In 1952 she returned to the Island following the deaths of her parents, and in December that year she sang arias from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* and Gounod's *Faust* at the Noah Moore Memorial Fund concert at the Gaiety Theatre. She rarely sang in public thereafter but turned her talents to producing musical shows for Douglas Choral Union and the Manx Operatic Society.* In fact, the year 1957 was the first time in the history of musical theatre in Douglas that two different shows for two different societies were produced by the same producer. In 1959 Norah was appointed as music teacher at the Buchan School (she was an 'old girl'), became a regular adjudicator at numerous local Eisteddfods, the Townswomen's Guilds Drama Festival, and was a judge for the British Legion 'Radio Discoveries' at the Villa Marina in 1953. She was an active member of the Soroptimists Club and a member of the committee of the Manx Music Festival for many years. Her life was fuller than ever.

* Notably Noel Coward's *Bitter Sweet* in 1953; Strauss's *Pink Champagne* in 1954; *A Night in Venice* in 1955, and Lehar's *Land of Smiles* in 1957; Strauss's *Gypsy Baron* in 1957, *White Horse Inn* in 1959, *Carousel* in 1960 and *Brigadoon* in 1961.

Norah Moore was a member of a family who contributed enormously to the enriching of the cultural life of the Island for many decades. A person of boundless energy and enthusiasm, she generously offered her experience as a performer to all the groups and societies she was involved with after she largely retired from performing in public.

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