

## Farewell, Dame Joan

by Mark McGinness

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### La Stupenda heard in the Abbey at last

La Stupenda never did get to sing in Westminster Abbey, well, not until 15 February, four months after her death, at her Memorial Service, her recorded voice filled the sacrum, the nave, the quire, the Great North Door, Great West Door, surely even Poet's Corner. The Great and the Good, family, friends, colleagues, and ancient fans who had not heard that glorious sound 'live' for two decades, gathered to bid farewell to Joan Sutherland. The healthy attendance in the Abbey recalled Dame Margot Fonteyn's comment about Sir Frederick Ashton's reaction from on high to his Abbey service, "Ah, a packed house; better than I expected."

It was eighty years short of a few weeks since the great Melba's Memorial Service was held; not at the Abbey but a few miles away at the Scottish Church of St Columba's in Pont Street, Knightsbridge. Sir Thomas Beecham, Charlie Chaplin and our own Peter Dawson were there on 4 March 1931 to bid her the last of many adieux. The sovereign (then George V) and Queen Mary sent a representative – so did their daughter, Princess Mary, Countess of Harewood, and a trio of Windsor princesses. It's how the royals mark their subjects' death.

For Dame Joan, the sovereign and her consort were represented too, but by their son, the Prince of Wales, a signal honour. And, rather neatly, Princess Mary's son, George, the Earl of Harewood, former director of both the Royal Opera and the English National Opera and a friend of Dame Joan's for more than half a century, was there to hear her recording of "Let The Bright Seraphim" from Handel's *Samson*. It was her ethereal rendering of this aria at Covent Garden in 1958 that had her audience erupt into a ten-minute ovation – the first real sign that a star had been born. One itched to burst into applause at hearing it again but convention and the awesome solemnity of the Abbey, managed to stifle such spontaneity.

Joan Sutherland was always lauded for her collegiality and an absence of less likable diva-like traits. She was widely admired for her interest in and support for younger singers. And so, at the suggestion of Richard Bonyng, 28-year-old Sydney born and educated soprano, Valda Wilson (a beneficiary of the Tait Memorial Trust, the Joan Sutherland Society and currently with the Dresden Semperoper), was invited to perform at the service. And she did so magnificently – singing Fauré's 'Pié Jesu' *Messe de Requiem Op 48* and Mozart's 'Alleluia' *Exsultate jubilate K 165*. The Orchestra of the Royal Opera House, with conductor Antonio Pappano also performed; and among the congregation were Yvonne Kenny and Yvonne Minton (who had been Mercedes to Stupenda's Micaela in *Carmen*; and Clotilde to Stupenda's Norma). In fact, they could have staged a full-blown opera. There was Lesley Garret, Elizabeth Connell, Wagnerian Dame Anne Evans and Dame Felicity Lott (who *has* sung at The Abbey – at the wedding of the Duke of York to Sarah Ferguson).

Other old links were apparent. Melba's great-great-grandson, George Vestey, was there; as was the widow of the great Sir George Solti, who had recorded *Siegfried* and *Requiem* with Stupenda. Another attendee was Mary Nolan, the widow of Sir Sidney Nolan, OM and sister of Arthur Boyd AC.

The striking statuary and soaring ceilings, the august atmosphere and Anglican tones of the Abbey made a great contrast to the sleeker lines, modern aspect and secular feel of Sydney's adieu in the Opera House Concert Hall. But the speakers and the text repeatedly reminded the faithful that Stupenda was, first, last and foremost, Australian. In his stately tribute Sir John Tooley, General Director of the Royal Opera House (1970 -1988) spoke of the young Joan being rejected from the St Catherine's, Waverley school choir because she sang too loudly. There were more moving reminders: tall, dark-haired, handsome (and with a look of Joan) Vanya Bonyng delivering up his monarchical grandmother's temporal gongs from a grateful Commonwealth – the OM, the AC and the DBE; followed by his grandfather, Richard Bonyng – still striking, almost leonine, and at 80, every inch a venerable maestro – reading from Colossians 3: 12 - 17. "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom; teaching and admonishing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with grace in your hearts to the Lord."

Among the prayers from the Dean was one “for the people of Orstralia, remembering in particular those who are homeless and dispossessed, suffering and mourning, as a result of flood, bushfire, and tornado.” The ‘minor Canon’ prayed for “all those whose lives have been devastated by natural disasters in Queensland, Perth and Victoria ...”

The Agents-General for Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria were there to pay homage and our High Commissioner read a prayer; as did a niece, Ruth Sutherland, and, again quite neatly, Isla Baring, daughter of Sir Frank Tait, the last of the legendary Tait brothers whose career encompassed bringing both Melba and Sutherland home; sponsoring the triumphant Sutherland-Williamson Tour of 1965.

Later the congregation would hear her again in a recording of ‘Casta Diva’ from Bellini’s *Norma*, one of her famed roles. Looking at the giant marble figures of statesmen, primates and heroes who lined the walls of the Abbey, one imagined even them being moved by the exquisite beauty of the sound.

And what splendid company for La Stupenda. No other Australian woman appears to have been honoured by a service in the Abbey. Captain James Cook, the poet Adam Lindsay Gordon, Howard Florey have memorials in the Abbey. Sir William McKie, Gilbert Murray, and Lord Rutherford are buried there while individual services have been accorded to a few of our Prime Ministers – Harold Holt in 1968 and Sir Robert Menzies in 1978.

The timing too was poignant. February was a significant month for Stupenda. It was on 17 February, 1959, that her career was made, when she played Lucia di Lammermoor in Donizetti’s *Lucia de Lammermoor* and there was pandemonium at the final curtain. On February 21, 1961, the day after her formidable, admirable mother, Muriel, died, Joan attracted ecstatic reviews for her performance of Bellini’s *Beatrice di Tenda* as a tribute to her. And of course it was in February 1960 when her Alcina so impressed the audience at La Fenice that her Venetian audience dubbed her ‘La Stupenda’ (the stunning one). In February 1972 she triumphed at the New York Met with Pavarotti in Donizetti’s *La Fille du Regiment*. *Time* magazine reported, that Sutherland proved she “can camp, shriek, mug and stomp about in boots delightfully without missing a gruppetto or smudging a staccato”.

Of memorable Abbey services in the past, many still recall the taped voices of Laurence Olivier and Dame Peggy Ashcroft ringing out as the crowd recessed. Although our Dame would have heartily approved her service ending with ‘God Save The Queen’, wouldn’t it have been something to hear her sing, one last time, ‘Home, Sweet Home’ knowing, of course, that she meant the celestial one.

Another fitting finale would have been to follow the lead of Sir John Gielgud at Dame Peggy’s service, “Now boast thee, Death, in thy possession lies a lass unparalleled.”