

## Jean Curphey

### 'Manxland's Ambassadors of Song'

by Maurice Powell

*Jean Curphey was one of the finest, most successful and versatile singers the Isle of Man ever produced, an artiste whose voice was as charming as her personality was infectiously cheerful, and who endeared herself to many both on and off stage.*

Jean Marguerita Alfreda Curphey was born on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1926 at the family home, Clifton House, Mona Terrace, Douglas. Her father Alfred (1889-1949) was the first caretaker and assistant at the new Manx Museum, although his role developed to involve a certain amount of conservation work and the organising and setting up of exhibitions.\* Jean's mother Hilda May (1892-1974) was a supportive housewife who 'loaned' the museum several items from the family kitchen during the early years of the museum's history, some of which had belonged to her mother.\*

Jean was attracted to music from a very early age. In her private autobiographical account of details and events from her life, she suggested that her earliest musical training took place 'in the womb' as her mother frequently listened to music on the radio or played gramophone records. Her mother later recalled that as a baby Jean would settle only whilst a gramophone record was playing, and that she would become increasingly restless when the mechanism wound down and required constant re-winding.

\* The Manx Museum was opened in November 1922 on the site of the original Noble's Hospital. The large-scale contour map of the Isle of Man which can still be viewed was entirely Alfred Curphey's project. In November 1937, the *Isle of Man Examiner* reported that 'Little Miss Jean Curphey, the daughter of A. H. Curphey', presented a bouquet to Lady Rose Levenson Gower at the opening of the Manx Museum extension. In April 1939 the Manx Museum and National Trust Report (Natural History Section) recorded that Jean had presented a mounted song thrush (catalogue number 4879) to the Museum.

\* Reminiscences of Jean's daughter Jill Kelly, who told me that most of the items were never returned!

Jean attended Finch Road Convent School, an establishment known for its devotion to music and the arts. Her early hopes as a dancer were dashed when her teacher Mrs Rushworth advised that, despite a developed sense of rhythm, she might be better suited to a musical instrument or singing. Discouraging although this may have been at the time, it proved to be sound, even prophetic, advice, as she began to take piano and singing lessons from Agnes Corris.\*

\* Mrs T. C. Corris was the conductor of the Woodside Ladies Choir, the sixty-voice mixed choir known as the Woodside Choral Society, and Laxey Choral Society. The Ladies Choir took part in several of Kathleen Rydings' Manx Amateur Orchestral Society concerts during the 1930s. See Maurice Powell, *A Very Gifted Manx Lady*, Wibble Publishing, 2014, and the same author's *Kathleen Rydings, 'Manx Musical Worthies'*, manxmusic.com.

The earliest references to Jean Curphey in Manx newspapers date from 1936, but as a budding young pianist. Indeed, the first mention of her was in the *Isle of Man Times*, 9<sup>th</sup> May, when she passed her preliminary piano grade. Later that year in December, the *Isle of Man Examiner* recorded her success in the Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music piano, Grade I

examination as a pupil of Mrs Corris. The following year, now a pupil at Douglas High School, she appeared in a concert under the auspices of ABRSM at St George's Hall, Douglas, which was deemed to be 'a most enjoyable affair', although poorly attended due to an outbreak of influenza. In July she successfully passed her Grade II piano examination, and in October she entered the open piano solo under twelve years of age class at the Blackpool Music Festival held at the Winter Gardens and tied in seventh place with her performance of Giles Farnaby's *Pawles Wharfe*. More significantly, 'little Jean Curphey of Douglas' entered a singing class for the first time and sang Parry's children's song *Rock-a-bye*.\*

\* *Isle of Man Examiner* 17.09.1937.

For the next three years Jean took part in a number of local Eisteddfod, church anniversaries and tea parties, as both a singer and pianist. She was a naturally talented young pianist and was mentioned in the *Isle of Man Examiner* as the piano accompanist for Miss Kathleen Rydings' Avondale Violin Class (the Avondale Junior Strings) at a young Manx musician's concert in connection with the Royal Schools of Music at St George's Hall. At the Blackpool Music Festival in 1938 she entered both the piano under fourteen and vocal solo under fourteen classes, and in the latter class she was placed fifth out of fifty entrants with 81 marks. The adjudicator, composer Herbert Howells, praised her performance as 'extremely good' but was concerned about her 'quite audible breathing'. In December that year she was one of the participants - 'all of which (*sic*) were good' - who took part in a concert entitled 'Manxland's Radio Variety Discoveries' held at the Villa Marina, although it is not certain whether as a singer or pianist.\*

\* *Isle of Man Times* 03.12.1938

Jean was first mentioned as a vocal soloist in the local newspapers\* in an advertisement for a Grand Concert at the Bethel, Circular Road, on 8<sup>th</sup> December, together with Onchan Silver Band. There are no further details of the songs she performed on that occasion. That same month she learned that she had passed her Grade III piano examination

\* *Mona's Herald* 06.12.1938

At the 1939 Manx Music Festival Concert held at the Palace Ballroom she learned that she had been awarded a Miss M. L. Wood Scholarship 'for the most promising girl in the piano class'. In July she passed her Grade IV piano examination, and in December her Grade II singing examination, both with distinction.

\* The highlight of the Festival Concert that year was the performance of Haydn Wood's cantata *Lochinvar* with the combined choirs, conducted by the composer.

Throughout this wartime period Jean began to be increasingly noticed as a talented and versatile young performer. A brief report of a Methodist Sunday School concert in May 1939 singled her out among the vocal soloists and declared that her 'solo passages were sung in a most charming manner'. The following month she appeared with the Lhergy Minstrels at a charitable concert held at the Swimming Pool Ballroom, Ramsey, after which the reviewer wrote: 'Twelve-year-old silver voiced singer Jean Curphey was one of the most popular turns' in a selection of popular songs, 'and was a great favourite'.

Old Christmas Day 1940 was celebrated with a Giense (pronounced 'ginss')\* at the Manx Museum which featured traditional Manx music, Manx yarns, Manx dancing and dialect speaking before an audience of three hundred. Thirteen-year-old Jean was identified as 'a vocalist of great promise (who) delighted everyone with her singing of *Tappaghyn Jiargey*.' The evening ended with the singing of *Aranne Oie Vie* led by Mona Douglas,\* Jean and others in Manx costumes. At the 49<sup>th</sup> Manx Music Festival in April – known as the Wartime Festival – Jean won the under sixteen piano class with 90 marks and was placed second with 87 marks in the age twelve-sixteen girls' vocal solo class with Charles Edward Horn's charming pastoral song *I've been roaming*. The adjudicator said of her performance: 'This girl tells her story well. The voice was a little reedy at times (and) not quite perfect vocally . . . (but) her diction was always clear . . . her phrasing neat. She gives herself to her song freely . . . a very fine piece of work'.

\* Originally a Manx gathering or revelry including a night-time feast with songs and stories, where young men and women would meet for dancing, with partners chosen by the 'master', who were then supposed to keep together for the following year. A musical simulation of such an event was broadcast on the BBC Northern Home Service on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1963.

\* Mona Douglas (1898-1987) was the Manx cultural activist, folklorist, poet, novelist and journalist, and the driving force behind the thriving modern revival of Manx culture.

In June, a report of a 'Nautical Revue', display of dancing and fashion display, that Jean took part in at the Ramsey Pool Ballroom under the auspices of the St. Aubyn School of Dancing, referred to her as 'Miss Curphey of the well-known fashion house, Manxonia of Douglas', and said that she was responsible for 'a most comprehensive and interesting mannequin show'. Described as a pupil of the St. Aubyn School of Dancing, she was also listed among the singers on that occasion. It is possible that at the age of thirteen she could have left school and was embarking on a career in fashion, although whether this was the 'office job' referred to in her private papers that she hated, is not known.

In November, Jean, 'our well-known local juvenile artist with a very sweet voice', was runner up at a Garrison Theatre Talent Night at the Villa Marina; at a similar event in December her 'solos were again well received' and she subsequently appeared at a winners' concert and sang the 'Mammy' song *Mighty Lak' a Rose* and the hymn *Just for Today* in a manner described as 'very artistic'.

Jean passed her Grade VI piano examination with distinction in 1942. In July she sang *Ellan Vannin* 'very sweetly' and accompanied others in a BBC broadcast for servicemen overseas during which personal messages were read out. In October she was once again the accompanist and vocal soloist at a Buck's Road Methodist Church Merrymakers Juvenile Concert Party; later that month she sang two songs - Charles Marshall's *I hear You Calling Me* and Eric Coates *Bird Songs at Eventide* – at a Rosemount Methodist Church Youth Movement 'display' and concert.

\* A number of reviews in 1943-44 referred to her as a mezzo-soprano indicating perhaps that at that stage her voice had not yet fully settled into the soprano she would become.

The following year she tied in third place in the piano, fifteen to eighteen class at the Wartime Music Festival; but 'why hurry?' remarked the adjudicator, who described her as 'a real pianist' whose playing was distinguished by 'real feeling and good contrasts' but concluded that '. . . speed robbed her of marks'. In May that year she 'trod the boards in delightful fashion' in the small part of a maid servant in a Legion Players\* production, a performance that drew from the reviewer the prediction that 'she may become a leading player in a few years' time'. In March 1945 she 'gave a bright performance' in their production of *Burning Gold*.

\* The Legion Players were founded in 1932 and are still going strong with over one hundred productions to their name.

The first mention of Jean in the Island's newspapers as a piano teacher occurred in July 1943 when two of her pupils passed their ABRSM preliminary piano grades; by December she had taken on some of her teacher Agnes Corris' piano and singing pupils.

On Monday 27<sup>th</sup> August 1945 nineteen-year-old Jean Curphey married Second Lieutenant, later Captain, Desmond Johnson\* of the Royal Hampshire Regiment at St Thomas' Church, Douglas. The reception was held at the Palais de Danse. She was described in the report of the occasion as 'a well-known talented pianist and singer and amateur actress with the Legion Players'. The couple lived at number 12, Cambridge Terrace, Douglas. Their daughter Jill was born in 1946, and in 1947 the couple spent a year in Germany whilst Desmond was still on active service.

\* Desmond Maurice Stanley Johnson was born in Simla, India, in 1915 and died in Douglas in April 1984. Whilst the marriage was not unhappy, Jean and Desmond were not ideally suited, the main issue being that he was not musical. When Jean moved to London in 1954 to further her career, they divorced, but remained good friends.

**' . . . a voice that is a gift from God'\***

In February 1950 Jean appeared in a subsidiary role 'which blended well' in the Manx Operatic Society's\* first production at the Gaiety Theatre, Rudolf Friml's *The Vagabond King*.

\* From a tribute to Jean in her programme of the 1951 Manx Operatic Society's production of Romberg's *The New Moon* from the coach and producer Rene Gibson. She was a founder member of the Society, inaugurated in 1949.

Later that year she appeared in a Cavalcade of Variety at the Gaiety Theatre when she and David Gray won great applause for their duets. In March she was the guest soloist at the World Manx Association Annual General Meeting, and in May was placed second to Eileen Peters in the soprano class at the Manx Musical festival.

The following year, 1951, Jean appeared in her first leading role, Marianne, in Sigmund Romberg's *The New Moon*. The reviews were unanimous in their praise for her performance and paid tribute to her 'wonderful voice . . . natural acting ability . . . and charm' . . . in fact all '. . . the main qualities that lead to fame'. Furthermore, wrote one commentator, she 'obviously enjoyed every moment of her role'. As positive as the newspaper reviews were, the comments and appreciation that will have pleased her most came from her co-stars, many of whom inscribed affectionate tributes in her programme. From Dan Minay: 'To Marianne

who as predicted 'Made History this year'. Good fortune go with you always'; from Leslie Kern: 'The finest leading lady I know', and from Charles McGovern, stage manager: 'To a grand new star of the New Moon'. Jean had 'arrived' and triumphed in the repertoire in which she would achieve her greatest successes.

### **'Jean's Years' at the Villa Marina**

This was the period when Joe Loss and his orchestra were playing for dancing in the Royal Hall at the Villa Marina; when Ronnie Aldrich and the Squadronaires entertained huge crowds nightly at the Palace Ballroom, when Bert Noble and his band were in residence at the Derby Castle, and all was well with the world. Jean's burgeoning career took a significant leap forward because Jack Leon and his orchestra had also been engaged for the Villa's Sunday Celebrity Concerts and for the afternoon concerts in the Villa Marina Gardens. Their association during the summer seasons of 1952 and 1953 would be Jean's most triumphant on the Island.

Pre-season, 1952 commenced with another successful production given by the Manx Operatic Society at the Gaiety Theatre, Jerome Kern's *Showboat*, in which she assumed another leading role, Magnolia. The notices were once again fulsome in their praise: 'Jean Curphey gives a charming and ingenious portrait of the romantic girl who falls for an adventurer, and her lovely soprano misses not a nostalgic note of the songs *Make Believe* and *You Are Love*'. One reviewer particularly admired her 'Southern drawl', and continued: 'In both singing and acting, Miss Curphey gave a wonderful performance. In the first act she was delicious, *just delicious* to look at and to hear'. She 'looks and sings like an angel', wrote another commentator, her top notes which she hit with 'the purity of a song-bird . . . proves that her former success was no "flash in the pan"'.

Jean's important first engagement in England took place in March when 'Manxland's Charming Soprano' performed with Radio Stars Rob Wilton and Charmian Ellis in Liverpool's Philharmonic Hall at the Annual Concert of the Liverpool Savings Committee.\* She received an enthusiastic reception and warm applause for her selection of operatic favourites and songs from the shows, and Douglas Operatic Society sent a spray of orchids to be presented to her at the end of the evening.

\* The chairman of the Liverpool Savings Committee had heard her the previous summer in Douglas and had been impressed. See also photograph in the *Isle of Man Examiner* 07.03.1952.

In May she was the Special Soprano winner at the Manx Music Festival with *One Fine Day* from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and Bantock's *Feast of Lanterns*, and later that month she joined the Lon Dhoo Choir, conducted by Douglas Buxton, and local singers Lewis Gale and Rob Nicholl in music by Romberg, Puccini, Johann Strauss II, Tchaikovsky and Lehar at the National Federation of Sub-Post Masters Annual Conference concert which took place at the Villa Marina. The reviewer was impressed by Jean's 'developing concert platform poise' and noted that the quality of her voice 'proves her to be something much more than a dainty singer of the lighter musical comedy numbers'.

### **'Jean Challenges the Stars'**

Jean was greeted by a 'spontaneous and prolonged outburst' of applause when she stepped onto the stage at the Villa Marina during the Sunday Concert on 22<sup>nd</sup> June. It was the kind of welcome that the Manx reserve for their own, and despite an evening of subtle backchat and banter, the radio variety stars Richard 'Dickie' Murdoch and Kenneth Horne were almost upstaged! She sang selections from Ivor Novello's *The Dancing Years*, Oscar Strauss' *The Chocolate Soldier* and Jack Leon's delightful medley *Visions of Vienna* and 'simply thrilled the people with her delightful singing and radiant personality'. Because there were 'waves of thunderous applause' as the audience clamoured for more, the evening overran and eventually ended at 10.15.

The guest celebrity variety artiste on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> July was the star of Radio's *Stand Easy*, Charlie Chester, but it was not Cheerful Charlie's night because, not only did he receive a back-stage rebuke for introducing *risqué* material into a Sunday concert, but he was then effectively upstaged by Jean who sang a crowd-pleasing selection from Coward's *Bitter Sweet* and Jack Leon's medley *Melodies of Romance* with a 'beauty of tone coupled with romantic artistry'. Her 'lovely voice coupled with an unerring instinct for captivating her listeners' left the audience demanding more, and Jean obliged with the *Song of Songs*.

Later that month Jean - '... an artiste in every sense of the word ... and as attractive in appearance as well as having a pleasing voice' - made a brief appearance at the Ramsey Pavilion's summer variety show and sang *Shine Through My Dreams*, Pestalozza's *Ciribiribin* and a vocal version of the *TritchTratch Polka*, which left the audience wanting more.

Billed as a Manx Night, the final Sunday Celebrity Concert of the season took place on 13<sup>th</sup> September under Jack Leon's baton. Jean - now described as 'Manxland's Ambassadors of Song' - was the principal artiste and sang arias by Puccini, Mascagni, Lehar and Romberg, Dvorak's lovely *Rusalka's Song to the Moon*, which would have suited her voice perfectly, and Haydn Wood's new song, *The Stars and the Music and You*. The end-of-season audience was enthusiastic but disappointingly small.

Jean had more than held her own that season even in such exalted company as the popular concert artiste and household name Joan Hammond, the coloratura soprano Gwen Catley, Joe Loss' newest resident vocalist Rose Brennan, and Vic Oliver's partner, the contralto Sylvia Campbell, with whom Jean had shared the honours at the Celebrity Concert on Sunday 10<sup>th</sup> August when she sang popular songs and arias by Puccini and Johan Strauss II. The following year would bring her even greater success and prestige

### **'The Manx Nightingale' holds her own**

Coronation year (1953) saw the Manx Operatic Society's lavish production of Eric Maschwitz's adaption of his own bitter-sweet play *Magyar Melody* at the Gaiety Theatre. It was the Society's most ambitious production to date, and another triumph for Jean, who took the role of the actress Roszi Belvary, and 'sang her way into the hearts of the audience with a practically perfect performance and is particularly captivating when she sings the show's title song *Magyar Melody*'.

That season Jean appeared with some of the greatest and most popular variety entertainers, concert artistes and popular singers and groups of the period including Sam Costa, Petula Clark, The Ray Ellington Quartet, piano duettists Rawicz and Landauer, comedian Dick Bentley, Polish baritone Alfred Orda, impressionist Harry Locke, the French vocal ensemble Les Compagnons de la Chanson, The Merry Macs and 'the voice of them all', Peter Cavanagh.

There was one anomaly that appeared in the programme for Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> May in that Jean was billed as Jeanette Johns on the front cover of the programme, and Jean Curphey inside the programme. It seems that either Jean was advised that at that point in her career a 'stage' or 'professional' name was essential, or that she decided that she wished to sing under a name close to her married name. When Jack Leon asked an audience to show a preference for which they preferred, they audience unanimously voted for 'Jean Curphey'. The matter was settled, and that was the last we hear of Jeanette Johns.

Jean was frequently 'in sparkling form' that summer and won several ovations especially when she sang the aria that had become her 'signature' aria: *One Fine Day* from Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. On three occasions she shared the stage with the most popular singers of the period, the concert soprano Isobel Bailey, the radiant star of Ivor Novello's *King's Rhapsody* Vanessa Lee, and Britain's favourite 'girl-next-door', singer and actress Petula Clark. The local newspapers invariably homed in on Jean's 'bright, vivacious' personality', her 'stage presence', and how rapidly her voice was maturing. There is no doubt that Jean was an enormous attraction at the Villa Marina that season.

One of the most popular Sunday Celebrity Concerts of the season took place on 6<sup>th</sup> August when Petula Clark, billed as Britain's 'number 1 Television Girl', was the guest star, together with Jean, before an audience of two and a half thousand. It was a characteristically generous gesture on her part that, at the end of the evening, 'she took our Jean by the hand', led her to the centre of the stage and said: 'You sang most beautifully'. Petula Clark was the ultimate 'down- town' girl.

The programme for Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> September was typical of the fare on offer that season. The concert opened with the orchestra playing Coates' March *Calling All Workers*; later in the concert the orchestra contributed the theme from Georges Auric's score for the film *Moulin Rouge*, Leroy Anderson's *The Waltzing Cat* and the Intermezzo from Mascagni's *Cavaleria Rusticana*. Jean sang a selection from Loesser's *Hans Christian Anderson* and continued with *The Waltz Song* from German's *Tom Jones*, *Oh My Beloved Father* from Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* and *One Fine Day* from *Madame Butterfly* in the first half of the programme, and after the interval, Jack Leon's medley *Top Tunes* together with tenor David Young. The two celebrity artistes were Roy Stevens, known as radio's Whispering Pianist, who gave impressions of well-known pianists Semprini and Winifred Atwell with the audience joining in with a selection of popular choruses, and comedian Dick Bentley from the popular radio comedy *Take it from Here*, who 'sang a couple of songs and fooled with the violin'. Not for the first time it was 'Jean's Night at the Villa', and her singing earned her the biggest ovation of the evening when she responded with the audience's demands for more with *Rhapsody of Love*.

At the final Sunday Concert of the season, 13<sup>th</sup> September, Jean appeared with the Manx Girls' Choir under their conductor Harry Pickard in a programme with a distinctly 'Manx' flavour. She concluded her selection with *Ellan Vannin*, and at the end of the evening was presented with a bouquet by Jack Leon himself, who told the audience that she was 'a great little trouper' and wished her every success in the future: 'may the fairies be with you always'.

### **London calling!**

At the end of the summer season, 1953, Jean was invited by Ivy Benson as one of the vocalists with her All-Girl Band\* who were resident at Lyons Corner House, Marble Arch, London, for an lasting some months. She was in her element, and confided to a reporter that 'what I liked best about singing in the restaurant was the feeling of intimacy with your audience . . . at their candle-lit tables . . .' She sang three numbers twice nightly; the most requested song was the perkily cheerful *Ciribiribin* 'which happened to be the restaurant proprietor's favourite . . . he presented me with a bouquet on my last night and invited me to return any time'. On one occasion she sang an impromptu duet with the Covent Garden tenor Paul Asciake who happened to be dining in the restaurant that evening. She also took tea with the composer Haydn Wood\* and his wife at their Baker Street apartment, and with the comedian Charlie Chester.

\* A photograph of Ivy Benson's All Girl Band at the Quebec Room at Maison Lyons, Marble Arch, from December 1953 shows a larger ensemble than she normally brought to the Island for her summer seasons which commenced the following year, that is five saxophones, three trumpets, three trombones, flute, four violins, 'cello, bass, guitar, piano, drums, and Ivy herself on saxophone or clarinet. Two vocalists are pictured, one of whom is almost certainly Jean Curphey.

\* Although born in West Yorkshire, Haydn Wood spent his childhood in Douglas before moving to London as a virtuoso violinist and composer and was invariably described with affection as a Manx composer because of his strong connection with the Island, and for his many orchestral works based on Manx traditional melodies. Jean Curphey often introduced his latest songs into her programmes.

A Ramsey resident heard Jean with Ivy Benson at Lyons Corner House and later recalled: 'she is very popular there'. Jean sent greetings to her Island friends and said that she was sorry to miss the Douglas shows that year.

In November she was auditioned by Gordon Thorne, the BBC's North Regional music director, which may have led indirectly to her appearance with Ivy Benson's Band in an edition of *Variety Parade* broadcast from the Lime Grove studios on Saturday 6<sup>th</sup> February, in which she sang *Vilja* from Lehar's *The Merry Widow* during the band's fourteen-minute slot. The local newspapers recorded that she looked 'charming, with a more sophisticated coiffure and a more subdued manner than usual'. Many of Jean's friends and supporters on the Island were able to watch her successful one-and-only television appearance and were doubtless proud that 'their girl' had made it to the small screen.

Jean was able to reach Blackpool after her London engagement just in time to sing with the Lon Vane Choir who were competing in the Blackpool Music Festival for the Stanford Trophy. That same day she auditioned at Feldman's Hall for a variety show and sang a duet with the Irish tenor Joseph Locke who was present, 'just for fun'.

Jean left the Island in 1954 to pursue her career in England, and she and Desmond Johnson were divorced amicably in May 1955. In September 1955 she was one of the guest vocalists at the farewell concert of Jack Leon and his All-Star Broadcasting Orchestra at the South Parade Pier Theatre, Southsea. The programme was a typical seaside confection including a light overture, a march, orchestral selections and novelty pieces, instrumental solos, a community medley and a Grand Finale featuring all the vocalists in Leon's medley *Top Tunes*. Jean sang *My Love is Only For You*, *Love and Music* and Puccini's *One Fine Day*.

In March 1957\* she took part in a concert and film show at St. Bride's Institute in the City of London under the auspices of the London Manx Society. She sang two groups of songs and was joined on the programme by young Manx pianist Heather Nicholl whose piano solos 'were much appreciated'.

\* By 1957 Jean was living in Beaconsfield and had made contact with a number of Manx people there, one of whom turned out to be her Sunday School teacher of twenty years earlier.

Jean Curphey's marriage in 1958 to Stanley Perring\* was by all accounts idyllic; the couple lived in Beaconsfield, Buckinghamshire, and later ran a furniture retail store in the Butter Market, Thame, Oxfordshire. Stanley was President of the London Manx Society for one term.

\* Stanley William Perring (1931-1969) was a member of the family who owned Perring's Home Furnishing Ltd., a business started by William Perring from the West Country who opened a store in Paddington, London, in 1892. Two brothers John and William between them owned twenty stores by the mid-1960s.

### **Jean at the BBC**

At the high-point of her career, Jean became a regular guest artiste on such well-loved radio programmes as *Friday Night is Music Night*, *Grand Hotel*,\* *The Melody Lingers On*, *Tuesday Tunetime*, *Music in All Directions*, *Music Mixture*, *Melody Mixture*, *Show Time*, *Songs for Everybody*, *Do You Remember* and one-off evenings such as *Vienna City of Music*. She performed with many regional orchestras including the BBC Scottish Variety Orchestra; the BBC Concert Orchestra; the Palm Court Orchestra; the BBC Midland Light Orchestra; the BBC West of England Light Orchestra; the BBC Welsh Orchestra; Anton and His Orchestra and the London Theatre Orchestra, with such conductors - some who were household names for radio listeners at that time - as Vilem Tausky, Reginald Leopold, Gilbert Vinter, Jack Leon, Rae Jenkins, Max Jaffa, Stanford Robinson, Reginald Kilbey and Ivor Slaney.

\* Jean's contract with the BBC for just one broadcast of *Grand Hotel* on Sunday 18<sup>th</sup> August 1962, reveals details of the financial rewards of the engagement: 12 guineas for the broadcast; 6 guineas for the recording of the broadcast; and three further payments for projected overseas broadcasts.

She also shared her broadcasts with singers like John Heddle Nash; John Hanson; Charles Kennedy; Forbes Robinson; Ranken Bushby; John Lawrenson; Joan Carlyle and John Mitchinson, the BBC Chorus and the Linden Singers.

The full BBC continuity script for the broadcast of *Friday Night is Music Night*\* from the Camden Theatre, London on Friday 19<sup>th</sup> September 1958, at 9.15pm has survived in the Kelly family's collection of memorabilia and will serve as a representative example of this well-loved programme, and Jean's contribution to it as a guest solo vocalist. The programme commenced with a fanfare, followed by announcer saying 'Friday Night is Music Night' and

the programme's signature tune\* followed by the announcer introducing the venue, the BBC Concert Orchestra\* and its conductor Vilem Tausky, the metropolitan Police Band, the BBC Men's Chorus, and vocalists Jean Curphey and John Hanson.\* The signature tune faded and the first item on the seventy-five-minute programme was announced: the metropolitan Police Band playing the march *Metropolitan*.

The orchestra's contribution to the evening began with Suppé's overture *The Beautiful Galatea* and Johann Strauss' *Perpetuum Mobile*, followed by a brief News Summary, after which the orchestra continued with Percy Fletcher's concert waltz *Bal Masque*, and *Schultz's Gretchen Polka* played by the band.

John Hanson then appeared and introduced and sang Tolchard Evans' *Lady of Spain* and W. G. Mills' *I'll Sing Thee Songs of Araby*, followed by the orchestra playing Percy Grainger's *Molly on the Shore*. John Hanson then introduced Jean Curphey and together they sang the duet *Fold Your Wings* from Ivor Novello's *Glamorous Night*. The band then played a novelty piece, *At the Punch and Judy Show*, and the BBC Men's Chorus sang two traditional songs: *Billy Boy* and *The Banks of Allan Water*, and Flanders and Swann's *The Hippopotamus Song*, followed by the orchestra playing an arrangement of the old music hall song *The Galloping Major*.

Jean then appeared as a soloist and introduced her own songs, Peter Revell's *Serenade to a Beautiful Day*, and *The Pipes of Pan* from Lionel Monckton's 1909 musical comedy 'hit' show *The Arcadians*.

The band played their last piece for the evening, a selection entitled *Lehar Melodies* and the orchestra played the *Tarantella* from Edward German's *Gypsy Suite*. The choir and orchestra then gave Richard Rogers' *It's a Grand Night for Singing* which segued into the entire company and audience singing a selection entitled 'Everybody's Songs': *Poppa Piccolino*, *She's A Lassie From Lancashire*, *Lily of Laguna* and *Marching Along Together*. The solo artistes were then invited onto the stage for the last time, and the programme ended with the announcer's familiar 'I hope that we have once again proved that "Friday Night is Music Night"' followed by the signature tune and fading audience applause.

\* First broadcast in 1953 and currently known as *Sunday Night is Music Night*.

\* An extract from Charles Williams' *High Adventure*.

\* Founded in 1953 having emerged from the BBC Opera Orchestra, the BBC Concert Orchestra is not a full-scale symphony orchestra but exists to provide broadcast light classical music. The first principal conductor was Gilbert Vinter; Vilem Tausky was the conductor during Jean Curphey's time with the BBC; the present incumbent is Bramwell Tovey.

\* The popular Canadian-born tenor, star of several West End musicals in the 1950s and '60s. His most famous role was that of the Red Shadow in Romberg's *The Desert Song*. He and Jean were well matched in their pieces, but she apparently found him difficult to work with.

What was billed as a Homecoming Concert celebrating 'Miss Curphey's return to her native island as a professional vocalist' took place on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> September 1958. 'Music for All' at the Villa Marina also featured the fine Maori bass Inia Te Wiata, the entertaining BBC organist Frederick Curzon, and the Lon Dhoo Choir under the direction of Douglas Buxton. Jean was truly 'at home' in a well-balanced programme of familiar favourites from the world of opera,

operetta, musical theatre by Sibelius, Puccini, Fritz Kreisler and Edward German, and 'as petite and vivacious as ever . . . her pleasing soprano voice brought loud applause from the large audience'. The *Examiner* reviewer remarked on her 'new, relaxed stage assurance' and 'the increased power of her singing'. At the close of the evening the entire company 'brought the house down' with the *Miserere* from *Il Trovatore* and *The Girl on the Prow* from *New Moon*. The *Mona's Herald* did not beat around the bush: 'After a long and indigestible summer diet of "pop" music, how refreshing to hear some honest-to-goodness wholesome music'.

\* Jean and Stanley were on holiday on the Island at that time, and she certainly looked radiantly happy in the *Isle of Man Examiner* photograph of 18.09.1958.

On the occasion of the Lon Dhoo Male Voice Choir's 21<sup>st</sup> Birthday Celebration Concert at the Villa Marina on Whit Sunday, 17<sup>th</sup> May 1959, Jean was joined by the illustrious tenor Heddle Nash and his son, the baritone John Heddle Nash. Heddle Nash sang arias by Bizet and Verdi and songs by Balfe and Carey; John Heddle Nash sang arias by Rossini and Mozart, and Jean sang Mimi's aria from *La Boheme*, Lehar's *Vilja* and the *Romance* from *The Desert Song*. All three soloists and the excellent choir joined forces in a Grand Finale.

By the 1960s Jean and Stanley were living in Thame, Oxfordshire, and she took part in the Towersley Festival, held at St. Catherine's Church between 1966 and 1968. On one occasion the Thame Choral Society was conducted by Vilem Tausky and William Gilbert.

Jean's last important concert in Douglas took place at the Villa Marina on Easter Sunday, 14<sup>th</sup> April 1968, an evening entitled Sounding Brass and Voices with Douglas Town Band, The Lon Dhoo Male Voice Choir and the Lon Vane Ladies' Choir directed by Douglas Buxton, the operatic baritone John Lawrenson and local tenor Jim Mitchell. The Royal Hall was packed for 'a great Sunday night's entertainment', and unsurprisingly, the evening lasting two-and-three-quarter hours overran, mainly due to the audience's persistent demands for encores. The band acquitted themselves in fine style in their opening march and selections from Romberg and Sullivan, and the combined choirs raised the roof in choruses by Verdi, Gounod and selections from Gilbert and Sullivan and Rodgers and Hammerstein. John Lawrenson was in a relaxed mood in arias by Bizet and Leoncavallo, and songs by Hely-Hutchinson and Alfred Hill; Jim Mitchell sang Handel's *Waft Her Angels* and Lehar's *Girls Were Made to Love and Kiss*. Jean joined both Lawrenson and Mitchell in selections of duets, and sang her favourite songs and arias by Puccini, Dvorak, Lehar and Romberg in her own solo spots.

Stanley Perring died in 1969 and Jean returned permanently to the Island. She was married for a third time in the late 1970s, but the marriage was unhappy and short-lived. From that time onwards she retired from the concert stage and devoted herself to family and friends. She died 7<sup>th</sup> October 2000 in Douglas.

The voice of Jean Curphey was that of a light, lyrical soprano, full of character, with a gentle *vibrato* and beautifully clear diction. As a performer she infused her songs and arias with charm and character; hers was the perfect vehicle for operetta and musical comedy for which she clearly demonstrated a natural flair. Her appealing stage presence and natural ability to communicate with her audiences meant that, if in the final analysis, her voice lacked the richness and intensity of a dramatic soprano, her performances of her favourite Puccini arias,

for example, invariably left the audiences moved and wanting more. Jean could have developed her career and expanded her repertoire into the world of opera, embarked on a series of tiring summer seasons in various resorts, probably ventured successfully into the world of nostalgia shows such as *The Good Old Days* or become a favourite of the Luxury Cruise Liner circuits. However, she had decided that she would concentrate her career on broadcasting only, even if this meant that she did not become a well-known household name like some of her contemporaries. My feeling is, that throughout a career of some fifteen years, she found the balance between a professional career and a happy home life that she was most comfortable with. With the benefit of hindsight we can also see that, like so many popular concert and variety artistes of the 1950s and '60s, her career began to fade before the relentless onslaught of Rock 'n' Roll. The age of musical theatre and operetta was over; her core repertoire was beginning to sound dated; there would be no major revivals of *New Moon* or *The Arcadians*.

Ramsey, February 2021.

**Sources:**

I am grateful to Jean Curphey's daughter Jill Kelly for the loan of the following material:

Selected entries from the autobiographical notes of Jean Curphey.

Newspaper cuttings scrapbook 1952-68.

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