JOAN HAMMOND SETTLES AN ARGUMENT

JOAN HAMMOND
A Christchurch girl—but only just

OUR first question to Joan Hammond, who arrived in Wellington the day before her first concert, was one in which *The Listener* had its own particular interest—where was she born? And it is now confirmed that the "former Christchurch golfer," as *The Listener* once called her by mistake, was indeed born in Christchurch, as we have already explained. But only just.

The story of how an abbreviation for *champion* had been interpreted as an abbreviation for *Christchurch* was our opening gambit for an interview with Miss Hammond in her hotel, and one we counted likely to appeal to a former newspaper reporter. It worked. We found Miss Hammond a very easy person to talk to, excepting only that she can often answer your question with a laugh or a look that leaves nothing more to be said, and the laughs and looks do not fill your pad with notes.

But this is how it came about that Christchurch can call itself the birthplace of Joan Hammond:

"I was nearly born at sea," she began, when we asked for the full story. "Father had to go on to Australia; he was due there on business. So there was mother—stranded for about five months in Christchurch. With my two elder brothers, both little then—and me. Mother even told me the name of the street and the number of the house—we were talking about it the other evening—but I've forgotten it. I've been back to Christchurch since, though."

"As a golfer?"

"As a singer too. I was singing small parts in that Italian Opera Company that was here about 1933—the one with Pagliughi in it. But I was there as a golfer later. I was in the Tasman Cup team in 1935. That was my last visit. So I do know *something* about Christchurch. I've ridden a bicycle there, and played at—'Shirley,' is it?"

"Not a Dramatic Soprano"

"Tell me—where did you get this about laryngitis?" she said, tapping her free copy of *The Listener*. We attributed the news to its Australian source. Miss Hammond and her secretary, Miss Marriott, looked at it, and at each other. "That certainly wasn't laryngitis," said Miss Hammond. "It was very acute tonsilitis," said Miss Marriott. "A very different thing," said Miss Hammond. And then:

"And what's this about me being a *dramatic* soprano?"

Miss Hammond wanted us to get this straight, and put our readers right too. She sings lyric roles, coloratura lyric, and some lyric dramatic roles, but never fully *dramatic* roles. Certain Wagnerian soprano roles she does sing, but never the dramatic ones. A dramatic soprano is defined by Percy Scholes as "with powerful voice and marked declamatory and histrionic ability."

What Kind of Audiences?

Then she wanted to know what kind of audiences we have here. "Tell me—is there a real musical public here?" she asked.

We were able to shift the responsibility for answering this question on to two observers whose experience was recent, and whose conclusions were the same. Both Lili Kraus and Solomon, we told Miss Hammond, had repeatedly expressed their delight with the attentive and appreciative powers of New Zealand musical audiences. So Miss Hammond was glad to hear this, and began to wish she had not decided to omit some "difficult" music from her programmes—Benjamin Britten's "Les Illuminations," for instance. But there still remained some things of more than common interest, and she was looking forward to discovering what we would think of *Dies Natalis* by the English composer Gerald Finzi. This is a setting of a poem by Thomas Traherne, a work taking about 20 minutes to perform. Originally, it was written for soprano and strings.

We asked Miss Hammond whether the type of programme she is singing here is usual for her—whether she gave similar recitals in Britain.

"Oh yes," she said. "It's quite usual. I sing lieder quite a lot. But as for building up a programme—you simply can't do it with operatic arias, and I am *not* going to sing a lot of operatic music with piano. The only trouble is I'm afraid that's what many people will expect, because they've heard the records I've made of things from opera."

Miss Hammond and Miss Marriott began to look restless, and there was talk of work to be done. It looked as if we could have one more question. We spent it on Miss Hammond's reporting days, and she admitted that those were busy days—her singing, her own golf, and reporting other people's golf.

"You did mostly sport reporting?"

"Oh, yes, mostly golf. But it was all those results at the end that were so dreadful," she said, with her palms to her temples.

"You never did a birdshow then?" we said, with the air of having knowledge of far greater suffering.

"No, I never did a birdshow—but I did a dogshow once! And once I was sent to cover a social evening. It nearly killed me."

A general movement began towards the lift. On the way, we learned that Miss Hammond will go next to South Africa (by way of Australia) and then back to London. The lift came, and Miss Hammond waved a hand.

"Au revoir," she said. "And *don't* make it up, *will* you?"

On Hearing Joan Hammond Sing . . .

JOAN HAMMOND, the Australian lyric soprano, who is known to us through her gramophone records as a fine singer in the broad cantabile style, began her first concert in New Zealand (given in Wellington and broadcast by 2YA) with an air from an opera by Gluck, and at the end of her programme she sang two well-known Puccini arias. In between were lieder, ballads, Russian and English songs, and two other operatic excerpts. Her five operatic items stood out far and away from the remainder of her programme, exhibiting her wonderful voice at its very best. It is a clear and charming voice; the kind of voice that seems, like the notes of a bellbird, to create its own sounding chamber. One could believe that it would have that same liquid quality anywhere.

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THE beautiful Gluck aria "O del mio doce ardor" was just right for the exciting moment of hearing Miss Hammond sing for the first time. Falconieri's villanella "Non piu d'amore" was a contrast to the Gluck, and it may be that a song of this kind requires a more agile voice for its quick, pointed rhythms. It was followed by what appeared to be an arrangement of a well-known movement from a string quartet by Haydn—the piece often played separately as "Serenade." In Miss Hammond's programme, this was described as "Canzonetta de Concert." It had been given words, in Italian, about "mio tesoro," and some additional vocal ornaments. Miss Hammond sang it very charmingly.

From this light trifle she made the transition to Dido's Lament (from Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas)* and gave a moving performance of one of the most tragic things in operatic music. One was suddenly reminded of her stage skill when she sang her last "but ah, forget my fate," and was able to prevent the audience from applauding before the pianist finished the postlude.

She has fine stage manners, without one mannerism, and an easy dignity that gives place readily to winsome charm when the music calls for it.

The group of four Brahms lieder brought out all the warmth of Miss Hammond's generous art. When she must leave the operatic repertoire, these are songs that suit her well.

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AFTER the interval, Miss Hammond sang "Oh never sing to me again the songs of Georgia," by Rachmaninoff (named in the programme as "Oh never sing to me again," which is not quite the same thing). This was followed by Rubinstein's "The Dew it Shines." Both were beautifully sung. "Don't come in, sir, please," a setting by Cyril Scott, which contrived to make a whimsical poem sound sentimental, and Quilter's "Love's Philosophy" completed this group, and led the way to "The Waters of Minnetonka," which was greeted with the stamping of feet. Miss Hammond's last group included songs by Cowen, Parry, and Hageman, and an arrangement by Liza Lehmann of "Have you seen but a whyte lily grow."

With the two Puccini arias which she sang as encores to the last group, Miss Hammond stepped back into her own ideal metier. The quality of her voice, the training it has been given, and her temperament and inclination all seem to define her as a lyric soprano to be heard best in music that has all the breadth of the operatic field, but with less effect in drawing-room music of restricted emotional range.

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ALL this implies that Miss Hammond lacks the "versatility" we hear so much about these days, but this is to her credit. There were great singers long before such a mixture of music was available for singing. When the Gluck aria which Miss Hammond sang so beautifully was composed, it was not even possible to obtain such a diverse collection of songs. Music had not been turned to so many uses in Europe. Yet this was no limitation upon artists. In our own times the formula for a recital programme, while purporting to exhibit an artist's "range," seems only to restrict a singer like Joan Hammond and prevent her from giving us the full force of her art in music that will accommodate it. If only she would sing more Gluck, some Handel, some more Purcell, and something of Monteverdi, she would have her audience stamping their feet for such music; instead she has to sing "By the Waters of Minnetonka" to get anything like an expression of opinion from them.

Raymond Lambert not only did a first-rate job as a well-matched accompanist for Miss Hammond, but played some effective piano music that established his status of "associate artist."

—A.A.