

# Of Quires and Places Where She Sings . . .

AS can happen with the best regulated airlines, something upset the schedule of Gladys Ripley's journey to New Zealand, and she arrived in Auckland late on Monday night, instead of on the previous Thursday. One recital had already been cancelled, but she agreed to give another in Wellington on the following day. She travelled down by air in the morning and just had time for a quick lunch before meeting the Press at a conference. The rest of the afternoon was spent rehearsing with Wainwright Morgan for her evening performance, so by the time *The Listener* met her she had broadcast once and was in the midst of rehearsals for her first public concert.

What did we want to know? she asked, while her accompanist waited at the piano. She was dressed completely in black, which went well with her brown eyes and olive complexion. She has jet black hair and her lower lip pouts a little—a very attractive woman as well as a great singer. And as she talked about her experiences since her first New Zealand visit she was friendliness itself. She sat back on the sofa, completely relaxed and self-contained, yet giving an impression of tremendous vitality, resting until she should appear once more before the microphone or on the concert platform. In the past nine years she had been singing with all the leading orchestras and conductors, she said, performing regularly at the Albert Hall ("it almost seems like a second home to me"), at big annual festivals like the Three Choirs, and singing opera with Stanford Robinson at the BBC.

"No, not on the stage," she said, when asked about her opera work. But she seemed to have sung in dozens of operas for the BBC: *Carmen*, *Eugen Onegin*, *Tales of Hoffman*—what were the names of some more operas?—well, she couldn't remember the others at the moment, but there were a lot of them. She gestured with her hand as she spoke; it wasn't terribly important. There was a story about her opera singing though. At one time her great desire had been to play *Carmen* on the stage, and then, years ago when the management at Covent Garden had offered her the chance, she had asked for three months to study what was then an unfamiliar role, and had never heard from them again. So that was that.

## Ten Verdi "Requiems"

What else had she been doing? At least 10 Verdi *Requiems* with Barba-rolli and the Halle Orchestra, and another Verdi *Requiem* with that Italian conductor—what was his name?—de Sabata, that was it. And she had been singing a lot of new works lately: the only two English performances so far of Honegger's *Joan of Arc*, Mahler's Eighth Symphony, Lennox Berkeley's *Four Poems of St. Teresa*—that one with the Boyd Neel Orchestra—and a performance before the King and Queen of Denmark of a *Te Deum* by a new Danish composer.

She had been making some new recordings too, a new one of Constant Lambert's *Rio Grande*, for instance. And of course there was that history-making one they had done of *Messiah* two years ago. It had taken 38 twelve-inch sides

to record, and even before it was made they had received an order from the United States for 20,000 sets. It was done with the Huddersfield Choral Society and the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra conducted by Sir Malcolm Sargent, and the critics were amazed at its tremendous built-up periods of choral-orchestral magnificence. Isobel Baillie, James Johnston, and Norman Walker were the other singers, and with Harold Williams, they had later recorded *Elijah* in the same way.\*

On the way home from her 1940 trip to New Zealand, she remembered, they had called in at Tahiti and met the ship they had come out on. A concert was arranged to mark the occasion, and she heard afterwards that some members of the crew had actually come to blows over the merits of her voice! When they eventually arrived back in Liverpool it was in the middle of a blitz, and they had to stand out in the estuary for 36 hours before landing.

During the war she had spent a lot of time entertaining the troops with ENSA. She went to the Middle East, Holland, France, and Belgium, and everyone always did their best on those trips, although from the troops' point of view they could do nothing wrong. She remembered how on occasions she had acted as compère, introducing everybody and everything, and found it a great experience.

What did she do in her spare time? In London she lived in a flat in May-fair, and whenever she got the opportunity, seldom more than about 24 hours, she would dash down to their house in Sussex—"by the sea, you know"—where she spent her time sleeping or taking her dog for a walk. He was a little Sealyham named Whiskey (spelt with an "e" she explained) and oh! he was a marvellous little dog. He was wonderful. She was greatly attached to him. Gladys Ripley gave the impression that like Isobel Baillie, who confessed last year to a fondness for "low-brow movies," she liked the simple things in life.

She was accompanied by her husband on this tour, she said. What did he usually do? He was a London business man, in real-estate, but this year he was looking after her on the tour. During the war he had been a squadron leader in the air force and had spent three years in the desert. Later we caught a glimpse of him—a tall, handsome man, and dark, like her. He wore a black, close-cropped military moustache.

Had she any family? Yes, she had a daughter in London. She was still very young, but she wanted to be an actress, and perhaps she would one day. She had a small part in a film a short while ago, and had also appeared in a masque at the Royal Theatre, Windsor.

## In Films

Miss Ripley said she had also done some film work herself, although her face had never appeared on the screen. Did we remember *The Great Mr. Handel*? She had dubbed for Elizabeth Allen (who played the part of the singer Mrs. Cibber) throughout that film, although nobody was supposed to know, and she didn't get any credit title in the

\*See 3YA programme Friday, March 25, 7.45 p.m.



Spencer Digby photograph

## ... An Interview with Gladys Ripley

film as far as she knew. But then everybody soon found out, because that critic who died recently—what was his name?—James Agate, yes, he let it out in *The Tatler*. She remembered the words he had used, right at the end of the review. "... and the voice, my dear people, is that of Gladys Ripley," he said. "He made it sound as if it was the most wonderful thing, but that was typical of him, wasn't it?"

Recently she had made a short recording for the new English film *Scott of the Antarctic*, but it wasn't used in the final version. They had wanted a sequence of Clara Butt singing "Abide With Me," and had decided at first to dub in her voice, but when they discovered an old Clara Butt recording which was acoustically quite suitable for their needs, they didn't use her record. She had still been paid for it though, even if it was a little like getting money for nothing.

We discovered that Gladys Ripley had always had a big voice, even in her

adolescent years, but that she has never made a fuss about it. At one time she used to be quietly amused by the mannerisms of the famous people she came in contact with; certainly she was always as matter-of-fact and unpretentious as she is now, when many critics regard her as England's greatest living contralto. Yet she learned singing the hard way, and her first teacher was a woman who kept a shop and instructed her pupils in the back, interrupting the lesson every time a customer came in to buy something. Gladys Ripley never had the opportunity of studying at any of the Royal Colleges, but eventually she passed into the hands of Madame Edith Armstrong, who has been her only important teacher.

What were her plans after this tour? Well, she was going to sing in Adelaide, Melbourne, and Sydney on the way back, and then she was expected back in London in June to appear in an Elgar Festival at the Albert Hall.