

JEAN ALLISTER

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Jean Allister was born in Ballymoney, County Down on 26 February 1932 and became one of Britain's leading mezzo sopranos of her day with a sumptuous contralto range.

She studied with Norman Allin at the Royal Academy of Music in London. He was a fine British bass who lived from 1884 to 1973, admired by everybody, adored by Beecham and highly accomplished in opera before embarking on a teaching career. Allin's other students were Pamela Bowden, Richard Lewis, Norman Lumsden and Ian Wallace.

Miss Allister sang Mistress Quickly in a student production of Verdi's Falstaff in 1954 and in the same year sang in Elijah at the Royal Festival Hall.

She had won the Minnie Hauk Prize in 1953. Hauk was an American operatic soprano (1851-1929) who gave the American premiere of Carmen and was said to have about 100 opera roles in her repertoire.

Jean achieved her LRAM in 1954. Her FRAM appeared in 1968.

In a versatile career, she worked with the Three Choirs Festival Gilbert and Sullivan For All, and toured the US with this company, Handel Opera, Mozart Society, English Opera and at Glyndebourne.

On 5 October 1955, she married Edgar Fleet and they had a son, Matthew. They often sang together in concerts.

She has appeared in oratorio and recitals since 1954 and at fifteen London Promenade Concerts between 1959 and 1970 and at The Three Choirs Festival between 1961 and 1977. Her debut with Sadlers Wells opera was in 1962 and she sang at Glyndebourne from 1962 and 1963. She was Rossini's Italian Girl in Algiers at the Camden Festival in 1961.

Her Prom concerts were notable. She sang in Mahler's Symphony no 8 in 1964 and, the following year, in the Resurrection Symphony. In 1968 she starred in Alexander Nevsky for Sir Charles Groves Farewell Concert with the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra she was one of the 16 soloists in Vaughan Williams' Serenade to Music.

She sang in Verdi's Requiem under Dorati in memory of President Kennedy.

She took part in the premiere of Henze's Novae de Infinito Laudes at Leeds in 1968 and in Cavalli's L'Ormindo in Munich in 1969 conducted by Raymond Leppard.



Her Covent Garden debut was as Herodias in Richard Strauss's Salome in 1971.

One recalls her television appearance as Amneris in the final scene of Verdi's Aida which was stunning.

She appeared in Scipio with the Handel Operatic Society at Herrenhausen and Drottningholm in 1970. She took part in John Gardner's The Visitors in 1972 and in the British premiere of Frank Martin's In Terra Pax in 1960 and his Requiem in 1975. With Opera North in 1980 she took part in Janacek's Jenufa.

Speaking of the many highlights in her career she recalled singing in Rossini's Stabat Mater under Vernon Handley where, at the end of the work, the mezzo has an important role. This was with the Huddersfield Choral Society and she also remembered a Maida Vale performance of Verdi's Requiem.

She once sang the part of the Angel in Elgar's Dream of Gerontius, a work she found, as have many, to be tedious.

Her wide range of repertoire resulting in her singing Palestrina and Delius and made recordings of Gilbert and Sullivan operettas, The Pirates of Penzance, Ruddigore and the Mikado but let us hope that she is not only remembered for that. She recorded the Stravinsky Mass under Colin Davis and Dido and Aeneas under Benjamin Britten.

Her second marriage was to Dr Rene Atkinson which took place on 20 February 1974. He came from Newcastle and was a competent pianist.

She retired from the concert platform in 1975 but she was asked to take part in later performances. The following year (1976) she was awarded her FGSM and was a FRSM Emeritus from 1979. She taught at City College of Music in Leeds after her retirement.

In 1985 she edited Sing Solo Soprano.

She had her health problems in recent years and died in Church Crookham, Hampshire on 11 July 2012. She was 80.

Her second husband died in November 2004.

Her hobbies included cooking, bridge and golf and she took up teaching in order to pass on both her skill and experience.

She was an exceptional singer whose voice and acting ability were always praised highly. She did not have the acclaim afforded to Kathleen Ferrier although she was superior in ability. She had a voice that was not plummy but rich and controlled and her contralto range was exemplary. Perhaps she has suffered because of her attention to Gilbert and Sullivan rather than the classics and has been regarded as merely a singer of operetta. Her work with demanding roles has been overlooked and she was not served well by record companies.

She was a delightful person who did not promote herself but retained a genuine modesty.

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