

SYBIL MICHELOW

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Although I have studied the voice and great singers for many years, I have never heard a more beautiful contralto voice than that of Sybil Michelow, and it is to be regretted that she made few recordings and that, because of this, she may be forgotten.

She was born on 12 August 1925 in Johannesburg, South Africa to Charles Michelow, a merchant, and Rae Lily (nee Shoul). There are two other children Grace, born 3 April 1922, who is a fine artist in water colours, oils, glass painting and interested in calligraphy, and Renee, born 12 December 1930 who is an illustrator, sculptor and needlewoman.

Sybil passed her first steps in playing the piano for the Trinity College Music examination when she was four and a half years old, and her adjudicator was Granville Bantock (1886-1946). At the age of five, she appeared as a soloist at a local musical event. She attended Mayfair Junior and Secondary Schools and Parktown High School. She received a Music Diploma from the University of Witwatersrand and continued to study the piano privately.



As a youngster, she preferred all the classical repertoire having little opportunity to hear contemporary works. In her informative years she enjoyed biographies and autobiographies. She came to know and appreciate pre-classical repertoire when in the UK.

From an early age, Miss Michelow was interested in composing and has written songs, works for piano and flute and incidental music for two Brecht plays, *Chalk Circle* and *Mother Courage*, while in charge of music at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art, a post which she created.

She came to London in late 1949 to study the piano with Franz Reizenstein (1911-1968), which she did for three years. But a growing interest in the voice promoted her to study singing seriously which she did with the fine contralto, Mary Jarred (1899-1993).

She married a highly respected GP, Derek Goldfoot (1917-1985) on 18 April 1950.

Her first appearance with a professional orchestra was in Bach's *St John's Passion* with the Orpheus Choir under James Gaddarn in 1956.

In 1968 she appeared at the Last Night of the Proms signing Wagner's *Traume* and *Rule Britannia*. The conductor was Colin Davis.

Between 1982 and 1988, she was a governor of the Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain, a society which has existed since the time of Handel to help musicians in distress caused by reduced circumstances and poverty.

Malcolm Williamson was a dear and respected friend. He wrote some works especially for Miss

Michelow and often accompanied her. They made a recording entitled *In Recital* under the auspices of the Jewish Music Institute, which includes songs in Hebrew and Williamson's *Ode for Queen Elizabeth*.

Sybil Michelow premièred Williamson's *Vocalise, White Dawns* (1985) and the *Feast of Eurydice* (1988) to a text by Elaine Feinstein. She also premièred Martin Dalby's *Requiem for a Sparrow* of 1970 and Wilfred Joseph's *Night Music* which dates from 1972.

White Dawns was Williamson's settings of four poems by Kosta Ratsin which Miss Michelow premièred at London University with Anthony Saunders at the piano. Williamson was a supporter of Marshall Tito of Yugoslavia and the work was written in support of the Yugoslav Studio Fellowship and in memory of Tito.

Williamson's *The Feast of Eurydice* was dedicated to his mother, Bessie. The première was at the Berkhamstead Civic Centre in 1988. It is scored for voice, flute, piano and percussion.

Joseph's work for voice and orchestra bears the inscription "to be sung by Sybil Michelow". The première was conducted by Sir Charles Groves. She also premièred Mansel Thomas's setting of Psalm 91.

She recorded *Dido and Aeneas* with Barbirolli, Dallapiccola's *Sicut Umbra*, Frank Menck's *Esperanto Songs* with the pianist Benjamin Kaplan, and Sir Arthur Bliss's *Pastoral: Lie Strewn the White Flocks*.

Merrick is best remembered for being professor of piano at RMCM, RCM and TCL. He was a male suffragette and a conscientious objector in World War 1 and, while in prison for this, he learned Esperanto.

I recall Sir Arthur Bliss enthusing over Miss Michelow's recording of his *Pastoral*. "A truly remarkable voice and a superb artiste," he said.

But I recall her singing Brahms *Alto Rhapsody* and the performance was spellbinding. I have heard it many times since and in good performances, particularly the recording by Brigitte Fassbaender, but Miss Michelow's performance stands out in my memory.

What is very interesting is that she approached every work and performance with great concentration, even the familiar works treating them as if they were first performances.

But it is not only her voice that makes her special. It is the way she communicates. She has the quality of causing you to conclude that she is singing exclusively for you. There are no histrionics in her voice, no ugly portamenti, no extremes, just sublime singing.

She is also a very sincere, charming person, courteous speaker, reticent and diplomatic.

Perhaps the BBC can find some of her recordings and issue them on CD so the world can be reminded of what a superlative musician she was.

Sybil Michelow died on 5 January 2013, our finest contralto, without any doubt.

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