

Remembering Beryl



To Antonín, and to Jillian and David, we express our heartfelt sympathy in their great loss. I feel very privileged to be paying this tribute to Beryl. The friendship between her and Antonín and ourselves began, oddly, because Antonín and my husband met when conscripts in the Czechoslovak army.

Beryl's life, so rich in music and in other accomplishments, began in the month when the Second World War broke out. Born in Middlesbrough, she went to school there and then attended a commercial college. She had private singing lessons with Betty Middleton, whom she greatly admired because she never spoilt a voice. Beryl herself always displayed great musicianship as well as captivating listeners with the purity of her soprano voice. Several people advised her to study singing seriously.

In due course she came to London and met some Czechs who suggested she attend the Prague Spring festival. She returned to London but in 1969 went back to Prague, to study singing with the Rector of the Academy of Music, though she was not allowed to take her degree. She managed to learn Czech, an achievement in itself. Beryl and Antonín had met fleetingly in England in 1968, when he came as conductor of the Moravian Teachers' Choir and they met again in Prague and married, in 1972. Because his wife came from capitalist England, Antonín lost the prestigious posts he'd held in Moravia, and had to work on building sites in Prague. It was a difficult time for them both, but Beryl earned some money by secretly singing with the Prague Madrigalists and the famous Pavel Kühn Choir, at the same time making some recordings. She talked later of all the queues she used to join; after waiting a long time in one, she was able to buy - just two lemons!

The Helsinki Accords of 1975 enabled them to leave Czechoslovakia and they came to London, both of them taking posts at Trinity College of Music. Beryl retired from the College in 2001. For years she was in charge of administering the examinations, a very exacting task which she carried out meticulously. Then David Pettit, the Deputy Principal at that time - who is with us here - needed a full-time secretary and gave Beryl the position. He says she was a brilliant secretary; often he would come into the office in the morning to find that she'd already answered some of his letters. When David left Trinity, Beryl became secretary to Derek Avis, also Deputy Principal (and later Principal). Derek has written to Antonín to say he cannot join us today, but writes: "Beryl was loved and admired by everyone at Trinity and for me personally she was a pillar of strength and support as well as a very good friend."

James Gaddarn, who was the teacher of choral singing at Trinity, was very taken with Beryl's voice and gave her the first of a number of solo singing engagements, including in Bach's St. Matthew Passion in Croydon's Fairfield Hall. After she sang in Mozart's C Minor Mass, in Queen Elizabeth Hall, a well-known pianist said that no one could have sung her part better. She sang on many less formal occasions and sometimes at the Czech Embassy - from which three representatives are welcomed here today. Naturally she sang works by her husband, and was also much admired for her rendition of the Song to the Moon from *Rusalka*, the whole of which she had studied in Prague. The only time I had the privilege of hearing Beryl singing a solo was at the memorial service for President Václav Havel's first wife, Olga, at the Farm Street Church, Mayfair. Beryl's beautiful voice flooded the whole building. Unforgettable.

This was a lady with enormous musical talent, but above all we cherish memories of Beryl's personality. Always dignified, she was gentle, unassuming and equipped with a fine Yorkshire sense of humour (and a gift for making excellent Yorkshire Puddings). We are grateful to her, too, for affording essential time and space for the composition of hundreds of splendid works by Antonín, for whom she was a truly devoted wife. She brightened all our lives.

Marian Werner