The Music of Miss Ann Watt

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My father Patrick Clancy Halling joined the London Philharmonic 0rchestra while still a teenager during the Blitz on London during which he served in the Sea Cadets as a signaller, seeing action as such on the hospital ships of the Thames River Emergency Service, which, formed in 1938, lasted for three years, using converted Thames pleasure steamers as floating ambulances or first aid stations.

Following his time with the LP0, he played with the London Symphony Orchestra together with his brother Peter, going on to specialize in Chamber music, his career including eight years with the Hirsch quartet, led by Leonard Hirsch, and the formation of his own string quartet, the Quartet Pro Musica. He also played with the Virtuoso Ensemble, whose distinctions included first UK performances of works by Peter Racine Fricker and Humphrey Searle, among other major British 20th Century composers.

In June 1949, he wed my mother, the Canadian singer Miss Ann Watt, who through marriage became Mrs Ann Halling, thereby substituting a Scottish surname for a Danish one. In Ireland, the Watt surname is exclusive to Ulster, home province of my grandfather James Watt, having been carried there by the Scottish and English planters of the late 1600s. It's common in the Scottish Lowlands, especially in the counties of Aberdeenshire and Banffshire. As might be expected the Watt surname is affiliated with that of Watson, and both are what is known as septs of the Forbes and Buchanan Clans, a sept being a family that followed a certain chief or Clan leader, either through being related by marriage or resident on his land, thereby making up a larger clan or family. Kindred septs include those of MacQuat, MacQuattie, MacQuhat, MacQwat, MacRowatt, MacWalter, MacWater, MacWatson, MacWatt, MacWatters, MacWattie, Vatsoun, Vod, Vode, Void, Voud, Voude, Vould, Walter, Walterson, Wasson, Waters, Waterson, Watson, Watsone, Watsoun, Wattie, Wattson, Wod, Wode, Wodde, Woid, Woide, Wood, Woyd and Wyatt and Watt.

She had been born Angela Jean Elisabeth Watt on the 13th of November 1915, in the city of Brandon, Manitoba, the youngest by 7 years of the six children of James and Elisabeth Watt from Ulster, Ireland and Glasgow, Scotland respectively, and the only one not to be born in Britain...the others, Annie-Isabella, the eldest born ca. 1897, Robert, James, Elisabeth, who died in infancy, and Catherine having been born in Glasgow, except Cathy, who was born in Ireland.

While still an infant she moved with her family to the Grandview area of East Vancouver. Grandview's earliest settlers were usually tradesmen or shopkeepers, in shipping or construction work, and largely of British origin. James Watt himself was a builder and electrician by trade who'd been born in the little town of Castlederg in County Tyrone, Ireland, then part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland. Grandview underwent massive change following the First World War when Italian, Chinese, and East European immigrants moved in, and still more after World War II with a second wave of Italian immigrants. It's still home to Vancouver's Little Italy centred on Commercial Drive.

Annâ s mother was from the great industrial city of Glasgow, her maternal grandmother having been â according to Ann - an Englishman from either Manchester or Liverpool, while her mother was Scottish, which means that my mother is of mixed Lowland Scottish, Ulster-Scots and English ancestry, not that any real difference exists between these three ethnicities.

Returning to my maternal grandfatherâ !he was probably a descendant of the Planters sent by the English to Ulster in the 1600s, many of them originally inhabitants of the Anglo-Scottish border country and the Lowland region of Scotland. According to some sources, Lowlanders are distinct from their Highland counterparts, being of Anglo-Saxon rather than Gaelic ancestry, although how true this is Iâ m not qualified to say. Certainly, the region straddling the Scottish Lowlands and Anglo-Scottish Borderlands, is one

traditionally perceived as Sassenach, which is the Gaelic term for Saxon, or person of Anglo-Saxon origin. Whatever the truth, the sensible view is that their bloodline contains a variety of kindred strains including - as well as Anglo-Saxon - Gaelic, Pictish, Norman and so on, depending on the exact region. Moreover, all Caucasian inhabitants of the British Isles - including the independent sovereign nation of Ireland - partake of a fairly homogenous ancestry, which certain experts are claiming to be more Iberian than anything else. In the end, though, are we not all of the same single human race created by God? As a Christian, I canâ t believe anything else.

The Ulster Scots, known as the Scots-Irish in the US, emigrated to the US in the 1600s, and their descendants are to be found all throughout the country, but most famously perhaps in those regions which are culturally Southern, which is to say those states situated beneath the Mason-Dixon Line. Indeed most of the original European settlers of the Deep and Upland South are widely believed to have been of British and especially English and Scots-Irish origin. Today, many of them describe themselves as merely â Americanâ , while others continue to claim either English or Scots-Irish ancestry.

While the Southern gene pool has been reinforced over the centuries by successive waves of immigrants, including Germans, Scottish Highlanders, French Huguenots and French Canadian Acadians, it remains significantly Scots-Irish and English. It's also a deeply African-American area, despite the 7 million black people who emigrated from the South to the North, Midwest and West during the period 1910 to 1970 known as the Great Migration. In terms of their music, their most famous port of call was surely the great Midwestern city of Chicago, where the Chicago Blues was born in the 1940s, this being a version of the original Country Blues enhanced by new developments in amplification. It went on to significantly inform the development of Rock'n'Roll, which was equally influenced by Country music, and most especially the variant known as Rockabilly.

The most influential Rock phenomenon of all time, the Beatles, were not overly influenced by the Chicago Blues, unlike their closest rivals the Rolling Stones. They looked to Rock and Roll, and other more recent and commercial trends in Popular music for inspiration, such as the music which eventually became known as Soul and which was to some degree a fusion of Rythym and Blues and traditional Pop, with elements of Gospel. As such they were the chief architects of Pop Music which went on to form the basis of Pop Culture and the entire Swinging Sixties scene. In this respect they differed from the prime movers of the British Blues Boom, who largely ignored Rock'n'Roll in favour of the Blues, and specifically the Delta and Chicago Blues. Out of this British Blues Boom, Rock was born although it would not be called this until well into the sixties. Many of these Blues groups jumped onto the Pop bandwagon created by the Beatles to form part of the British Invasion of the US Pop charts. They included the Rolling Stones, the Animals and the Who. In time, they all became known as Rock groups, whether British or American, although Pop survived as an alternative generic description. Today, however, Pop is viewed rather as a strain within Rock or a sub-genre, or as a different form of music altogether. From the grafting of anti-establishment values onto a music that seemed like little more than noise to many members of the older generation, a massively successful commercial phenomenon with millions of followers worldwide came into being. Its cataclysmic effect on the moral fabric of the Christian West cannot be underestimated.

By the time he'd moved his family to Grandview, my grandfather James Watt had abandoned the severe Presbyterian Calvinism of his Ulster boyhood and youth for the more open - Wesleyan - theology of the Salvation Army. Yet, in keeping with the Army of that time, his approach to Scripture was what would be described as fundamental today; and he was accordingly opposed to worldly pleasures such as dancing, the theatre, and movie-going. Alcohol was nothing short of the Devilâ s own elixir, while even the drinking tea and coffee was frowned upon.

At the age of 14, Angela joined her friend Marie and Marieâ s mother on a car trip just beyond the US-Canadian border into the state of Washington, where she saw her very first movie, a romantic civil war picture entitled â Only the Braveâ starring Gary Cooper and Mary Brian. Its effect on her was little short

of seismic, as by her own admission it introduced worldly ideas into her psyche for the very first time. Despite an intensively Christian upbringing, from then on, she became consumed by the glamour of the movies and show business. In other words, she'd allowed the camel's nose into her life, and it only remained for the rest of the camel to follow.

At high school, she'd been a good but not exceptional pupil, unlike her closest friend Margaret Stone, who excelled both in schoolwork and sporting activities, while Angela's single sporting distinction was being part of her school track team. However, it was in the Glee Club that she came into her own, thanks to a singing voice that was of a rare beauty and quality.

When she was 17, her father became very seriously ill and she was forced to take time off school to do her share of looking after him. She spent long periods of time by his bedside, weeping for a man who when she was still only a little girl had a habit of affectionately flicking the back of her hair and she'd scolded him to make him stop. She was off for so long that Margaret Stone had come calling for her with another friend, concerned by her long absence. He died after a short illness, and Angela, utterly heartbroken, wept openly at his funeral.

In her final year at high school, Angela learned short hand and other tools of the secretarial trade, while working part time at F.W. Woolworth's on Commercial Drive. After leaving, she started work answering telephone enquries on behalf of her sister Cathy's laundrette business. She ran a branch specialising in the washing and starching of mens' collars.

In time though, she was able to make her living exclusively as a soprano singer. Many of her greatest triumphs took place at the Theatre Under the Stars, one of Vancouverâ s most famous musical theatres, which officially opened on August the 6th 1940. At the TUTS, Miss Ann Watt as she became known played the lead in such classic operettas â which were the musical comedies of their day â as Oscar Strausâ â The Chocolate Soldierâ (1908), based on George Bernard Shawâ s â Arms and the Manâ , â Naughty Mariettaâ (1910) by Victor Herbert, with libretto by Rida Johnson Young, and â The Student Princeâ (1924) by Sigmund Romberg, with libretto by Dorothy Donnelly.

For the CBC with full orchestra, she broadcast many popular classics. With the accompaniment of Percy Harvey and the Golden Strings she sang Noel Cowardâ s â Iâ ll See You Againâ from â Bittersweetâ as well as two songs by Victor Herbert, â A Kiss in the Darkâ from â Orange Blossomsâ , and with â Sweetheartâ with the baritone singer Greg Miller. She also sang another lovely song by Herbert, â â Neath the Southern Moonâ from â Naughty Mariettaâ , â Strange Musicâ from â The Song of Norwayâ (1942), adapted by Wright and Forrest from Griegâ s â Wedding in Troldhaugenâ and â Canâ t Help Singingâ by Kern and Yarburg from the 1944 movie of the same name. She also broadcast Classical songs such as â les Filles de Cadizâ by Delibes and â Depuis le Jourâ from Gustave Charpentierâ s â Louiseâ , and German liede sung in English â due to wartime restrictions on the German language - to the piano accompaniment of Phyllis Dylworth, among these Schubertâ s â To be Sung on the Waterâ , and Richard Straussâ s exquisite â Nightâ (â Die Nachtâ).

After the war, she hoped to expand her career either in the US or the UK, but despite a successful audition for the San Francisco Light Opera Company, she ultimately opted for England, once a ticket to sail had become available to her.

She set sail for Britain laden with letters of recommendation from her singing teacher Avis Phillips, as well as â presumably - numerous press cuttings from her brilliant Canadian career. She'd been led to believe that once in London, she'd effectively take the singing world by storm, at Drury Lane and elsewhere. Sadly though, soon after arriving, she failed an audition for the internationally famous Glyndebourne Opera House, home of the annual festival of the same name.

However, she did land a small role in the Ivor Novello musical, â Kingâ s Rhapsodyâ which opened at the Palace Theatre on the 15th of September 1949, with its author one-time matinee idol Novello in the title role. It ran for 841 performances, surviving Novello who died in 1951. She also broadcast for the BBC, and among the songs she performed were Debussyâ s â Des Fleursâ , and the popular Harry Ralton standard â I Remember the Cornfieldsâ with lyrics by Martin Mayne, and appeared in an early television show called â Picture Postâ . Sadly though, it wasnâ t long after her arrival in London that she realized her voice was deteriorating - this being especially true of her top notes - possibly as a result of sleeping difficulties, although mention must be made of her former lifestyle in Vancouver, where in the cityâ s many night clubs she loved to dance, drink and smoke until the small hours.

She went from one singing teacher after the other in the hope that her once near-perfect voice might be restored to her but little came of her efforts, although one of her tutors, who just happened to be the great German soprano Elisabeth Schumann did offer some hope. Schumann suggested to my mother that once her time in England was over â she recorded her last liede 78s in London with the British pianist Gerald Moore - she accompany her back to New York City where sheâ d been resident since 1918.
My mother, however, turned the great Schumann down, feeling sheâ d already spent enough money on lessons, and besides she was seriously involved with a London-based musician my father Patrick Halling, whom she married in June 1949, and so uprooting would not have been easy, and they were far from rich. They spent the next seven years living the vie de bohème in a peaceful post-war London and on the continent, travelling by car or motorcycle, just happy being young and in love in that relatively innocent period between the end of the Second World War and the birth of the Youth-Rock culture, after which things would never be quite the same againâ ¦

Actually first published 23 May 2010, with repeated edits ensuing, which almost certainly rendered the number of views invalid.

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