

Patrick Bade | Myra Hess

*Music plays*

*Images are displayed throughout the lecture*

- Now "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring," from a Bach Cantata arranged by Myra Hess herself, that is the piece of music most associated with Myra Hess throughout her career. And she recorded it several times. This particular record made in 1929 for HMV was my first encounter with Myra Hess. And that was in the summer of 1958, when I was six years old. And I was taken to a Roman Catholic charity bazaar in Bognor Regis, and I was given the grand sum of one shilling to spend, one shilling, that was 12 pence then. It would be the equivalent of five pence today. So even then, it was a very small sum of money, but I was able to buy two things. I bought a shocking pink, sweet, fizzy drink. It cost me six pence. It was absolutely disgusting. It actually put me off sweet, fizzy drinks for life. I still detest Pepsi Cola and Prosecco. And I remember this priest watching me drink it very slowly, and saying, "Oh, he's this little boy, he obviously loves it. He's really savouring it." And I was secretly thinking, "No, it's so disgusting, I can't get it down." Then I moved on to another stall, and there was this record and the name Myra Hess. And I asked the priest in charge of the stall, "Is Myra Hess a soprano?" I was completely besotted at that age with the soprano voice. I still am. And the priest said, "Oh yes." He assured me that Myra Hess was a soprano. While that was not the first, the last or the worst time, I suppose, that the Catholic priest has not told the truth.

Of course, when I got home, I was very disappointed to discover it was a piano piece. And it was some years, I think, before I really appreciated and came to love it. And now I love not just the music, but the wonderful serenity of her interpretation. In fact, I should really have known her name even at that age because my auntie, my Auntie Nell, was a great admirer of Myra Hess. My aunt had been a student at the Royal Academy of Music, where, of course, Myra Hess herself had been a student. My aunt, this was during the Second World War, and my aunt kept a diary of her experiences. You can see a couple of illustrations on the right-hand side. And she made little portraits of the musicians that she most admired, and she would take them to the musician and get them to sign. As you can see, Myra has signed her name under this portrait made by my auntie. Now Myra Hess was a very fine pianist, and she would be remembered today just for that. But it's not, of course, the reason that I'm talking about her today. She was one of those people, and I suppose there were a number of them in the Second World War who had greatness, a certain greatness thrust upon her by political circumstances. Another might be Vera Lynn. Very nice singer, of course, but we wouldn't remember her today in the way that we do if it were not for the fact that when tested, she really came up to scratch.

I mean, I talked just a week ago about Furtwangler, who I believe was a moral, and honourable man, and not without a certain courage, but he somehow failed the test in the Second World War. That could not be said of Myra Hess. She was a woman of extraordinary bravery, as I'll explain later, and also of vision. Well, she was born into an assimilated Jewish family in South Hampstead. And she showed early promise, although she always denied that she was any kind

of child prodigy. And she went to the Royal Academy of Music, and she was taught by the man you see on the right hand side, Tobias Matthay. He was a piano, what the Germans would call, klavierpadagoge. We don't really have a word for that in English. He was, yes, he was a piano teacher, but on a very grand level, and of German origin. And today he is principally famous for the fact that he taught three very talented and very beautiful Jewish girls from North London.

On the left is Irene Scharrer. She was born in 1888. In the middle is Myra, as you can see, very, very lovely girl at this stage of her life, and on the right hand, she was born in 1890, and five years later 1895, was the birth of Harriet Cohen. Also a very famous beauty actually throughout her life. And I'm not sure if Helen Fry has actually talked to you about her. If she hasn't, she should do, because Helen's written a very excellent book, "The Life of Harriet Cohen," what was a very interesting life, quite apart from her musical talents. So these, Irene Scharrer and Myra Hess were very close friends. In fact, Irene Scharrer and Harriet Cohen were related. They were cousins. And Myra Hess and Irene Scharrer were not related, but many people assumed that they were sisters, because they looked quite alike. And they behaved like sisters, and they were lifelong, devoted friends. And later in life as middle-aged women, when they got together, they were apparently like, very giggly, like naughty schoolgirls.

And I can't resist sharing with you another childhood memory for me, which is a record of Irene Scharrer. She made a number of records. She was also very fine, fine pianist, although her career was more local than that of Myra Hess. And she made one record that was a huge bestseller. I think it was in every middle class house. Every music-loving, middle class house in England had this record of Irene Scharrer playing the delightful, tuneful skittish Scherzo from the Liszt Concerto Symphonique. My sister, I think she's listening in, she'll remember this because as small children, we used to dance together to this music in my grandmother's house. So Myra made her debut age 17 in 1907, playing the Beethoven "4th Piano Concerto" in a concert that was conducted by Mr. Thomas Beecham. He was not yet a baronet. That was an inherited title that he got later, who was also making his debut as a conductor. So two of the great careers in British classical music started on the very same day. And she went from success to success. And her career was an international one. She frequently played in America, and she was a favourite soloist of the great Dutch conductor Willem Mengelberg. So she went very often to Holland to perform with the Concertgebouw.

Now, the moment when greatness was thrust upon her was of course the outbreak of the Second World War. She had just signed a contract to go on a seven month tour of North America and Australia. And you would've thought she would've just breathed a sigh of relief and thought, "Oh, thank goodness I'm getting out of all of this." I mean, there was a widespread belief that London would be completely destroyed, more or less over overnight, when people had seen what the Germans had done to Guernica. And of course they did succeed in destroying Rotterdam pretty well overnight, and was thought the same would happen to London. She decided she could not leave England at this moment. And she broke her contract at very considerable cost, because she was actually sued by the American entrepreneurs for breaking her contract and had to pay a large penalty. But it was also very brave because especially after

the fall of France in May/June, 1940, and Jews living in England must have felt incredibly threatened. The chances of Britain coming out of the Second World War successfully and intact seemed very remote in the summer of 1940. For most people, it must have seemed inevitable either that the Germans would succeed in conquering this country, in invading, or that if it were not for Winston Churchill, it's very likely of course that Britain would've done a deal, which would also have been very dangerous for British Jews. But Myra Hess hung in there, and she remained.

So I've got some images here of the Blitz. These nightly air attacks on London from, they started on the 7th of September, 1940. and London was attacked every night until the 11th of May, 1941. Of course, Kiev and Ukrainian cities are undergoing the same kind of horror now, but not on the same scale. There are certainly deaths, of course, in the Ukraine. But there were 30,000 Londoners who died in the Blitz of London from September, 1940, to May, 1941. And there was of course unbelievable destruction. And as I said, it took courage to remain, especially when she had a very profitable offer to go. And she certainly contrasts with Sir Thomas Beecham, the man who started his career on the same day. The moment the first bomb fell, Beecham was out of sight. And he went over to America where he remained for the rest of the war in safety. Here are some of the iconic images of London, Londoners sheltering from the bombs in the underground system, the ruins of the city of London, somehow miraculously the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral surviving, surrounded by a great sea of rubble by the end of the Second World War.

Now the Germans and the British had very different approach to culture. This is something I've talked about before. For the Germans, it was so integral to their self-image, particularly musical culture. So, you know, music was kept going all the way through the war in Germany to the very bitter end. In Britain, the two opera houses in London, the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden, and Sadler's Wells, they shut down immediately the Blitz started. And actually from the start of the war, the BBC played nothing but popular music on a Wurlitzer. So there was no music even to be had over the radio. And Myra Hess was absolutely horrified by this. She said, "No, no, this is the very moment "when we need music; we must have music to keep us going." And she went to Sir Kenneth Clark, who you see on the right hand side, who's the young, dynamic director of the National Gallery. National Gallery was empty. Here are the pictures of the National Gallery on the way to a mine shaft in Wales, where they were kept safely till the end of the war.

So here you can see Myra Hess in one of her concerts in the museum with empty walls, with empty frames. And she went to Sir Kenneth Clark, and she said, "Well, you know, we've got this empty space in London, "in the middle of London. "Why don't we put on concerts once a week?" And his immediate response was, "Why once a week? "Why not every day?" And so in fact, starting on the 10th of October, 1939, every day of the week except Sunday, they gave a concert, classical concert, throughout the blitz, throughout the war. Altogether there were 1,698 classical concerts given in the series at the National Gallery. And Myra Hess, she organised all these concerts, she invited musicians, and she performed in 146 concerts herself, so it was a

real huge achievement. On the screen is a still from the- you'll find on YouTube several films of her performing at this time during the war. I'm going to play, thanks to Lauren's managed to find a very nice excerpt I hope to play you at the end of this talk. But there's also, you can see her playing the whole of the "Appassionata Sonata" by Beethoven, and this is a still from that. When I watched that, I became completely obsessed by the empty frame behind her. I thought, "I know that frame, I know that frame." And so next time I went to the National Gallery, I walked around looking at the frames and aha, I had an aha moment. Yes, indeed, it's is the frame of the Pollaiuolo Martyrdom of Saint Sebastian.

So these concerts, as I said, the first one, 10th of October, 1939, because of the danger of bombing, the home office sent out a directive that there should be no more than 200 people gathered together for a concert because of the danger of a bomb dropping in and causing carnage. But in fact, for that first concert, more than a thousand people were squeezed into the concert hall inside the National Gallery. There were many hundreds more who were left out on the street who couldn't get in. The first concert consisted of music of Beethoven, inevitably, I mean, Beethoven in a way, provided the soundtrack of the Second World War from a classical point of view. And the other composers were Scarlatti, Schubert, Brahms, and Myra Hess ended with signature, "Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring." So the interesting thing about that is, of course, not one single British composer, or French. All the music was from enemy nations. And I think it's actually, I'm quite proud of the fact, actually that the British still loved their Beethoven, and they still loved their Schubert, their Mozart, all the way through the war.

In Germany, it was quite different. Everything that was not Austro-German was more or less banned in Germany during the Second World War. And there was a problem, or they thought there might be a problem with songs. Certainly the BBC, they were happy to play songs by Schubert, arias by Puccini, and so on, but not in their original languages. So it was a ban on Axis languages. You could hear Russian, you could hear French, but you could not hear German or Italian on the BBC throughout the Second World War. And Myra Hess, she wanted to include lieder recital, and particularly because they had the very great lieder specialist, Elena Gerhardt. She was a German Jewish refugee, she was in London, she was regarded as the high priestess of the German lied. Well, she was not going to perform Schubert in English. She insisted it had to be in German. So they put on a concert. They were very, very nervous, both of them. Myra Hess was playing the piano, Elena Gerhardt singing in German. But they got such a warm response from the audience that in fact, they were so moved that at one point, they could hardly continue with the concert.

Kenneth Clark, because he talks about these concerts in his memoirs and was an incredible experience, it was. And he said, looking, as he said, at the rapt faces, of the people listening to the music, he said it was like he imagined audiences for the great preachers of the Reformation Period, that the audience were completely absorbed, completely concentrated, completely carried away by the musical experience. It cost one shilling to go to the concert. Not, as I said, not a large, a very small sum of money. It was something that pretty well everybody could afford. And the other attraction were the wonderful sandwiches, which was said to be, you know, there

were food shortages. It wasn't that easy to find something good to eat in London during the Second World War. So that was certainly an attraction for many people, that apparently the best sandwiches in London were to be had at the National Gallery. The gallery was hit several times during the Blitz, and there were several times, problems with unexploded bombs. Of course, they're still being found in London, as they are in German cities, left over from the Second World War.

So in fact, the only occasion, because one of the attractions of the National Gallery was that it had very deep cellars. So in the worst periods of the Blitz, when there were even daytime raids, the concerts descended into the cellars. There was just one occasion when there was a huge, unexploded bomb, and it was too dangerous, they still went ahead with concert. They crossed the street, the audience and the performers to South Africa House on the other side of Trafalgar Square. And it wasn't always comfortable. In the summer, in the cellars, it was sweltering hot. And in the winter it was freezing cold. And sometimes Myra Hess had to resort to playing the piano, wearing a fur coat. There were a huge number of performers. All the best performers who were in London throughout the war took part in these concerts. The musical level was very high indeed.

And Myra Hess formed a particular bond with the Griller Quartet, In surviving correspondence, they dubbed her Auntie, and she talked about them in her letters as her dear nephews. she had a wonderfully earthy sense of of humour. She liked dressing up for parties as Queen Victoria. As you can see she rather looked role by this stage in her life. And there are many very funny stories about her. Joyce Grenfell tells a story about, she was a very incredibly kindly woman. And she particularly was very welcoming to any refugees from the Nazis who came to London, and very helpful to them. There was one very distinguished professor. And Joyce Grenfell is very coy about what his name was, but I think we can imagine that it was probably K-A-N-T or F-U-C-K. And Myra Hess said to him in a kindly way, dear Professor, I think now you are in England, perhaps you ought to change your name. And he said, "Oh, really?" And he had new cards, professional cards printed with his new name, Professor Smith or whatever he was, and then in brackets underneath, formerly F-U-C-K, or whatever his name actually was. Anyway, here, this is an amazing historical document to have survived. This is recorded live during one of these lunchtime concerts in the National Gallery on the 22nd of August, 1942.

And this is the Brahms "Piano Quintet" with Myra performing with her nephews, the Griller Quartet. I'd also like to play you Myra playing some Schumann, because Schumann was a composer that she, rather as with Bach, she had a very special affinity. So here she is playing a movement from Schumann's "Carnaval." She was a busy woman through the war, because not only was she organising these daily concerts and very often performing in them, she also took part in the other great musical event of the Second World War, which were the prom concerts, which continued not quite as regularly as the National Gallery concerts. At certain moments when the Blitz was particularly bad, and then of course, at the end of the war, when you had those terrible rockets falling on London, the V1s and the V2s, the prom concerts were cancelled. But Myra Hess took part in quite a number of these. The main picture here, the black and white

one, is London's premiere music hall up to the Second World War. This was the Queen's Hall at Langham Place, which apparently had a wonderful acoustic, and sadly that was destroyed on the very last night of the Blitz, on the 10th of May, 1941. And thereafter, the proms moved to the great Albert Hall and the building's so vast and so solid. I don't think the Germans had a bomb capable of destroying that. And that's where the proms continued, and of course where they are to this day.

And she was also, her services were required, for other purposes. She was summoned to Buckingham Palace to keep the queen amused while she was posing for this portrait by Augustus John that you can see on the right-hand side. And she also, and it shows some measure of the respect and the trust that the government had for her, she was smuggled into Bletchley Park to provide musical sustenance for the code breakers of Bletchley Park was one of the top, top secret activities of the Second World War, and which you probably know all about, because I think you've been listening to Helen Fry's lectures. And so she was a very shy woman. I mean, she was loved by her friends, but she had an absolute aversion to speaking publicly. And, again, if you want to go onto YouTube, and you type in Myra Hess interview, there is just a very brief interview with her talking. It's quite interesting to hear her voice. She was a heavy smoker. And I think you can hear that in her speaking voice. As I said she had a wonderful sense of humour, and she was prepared to, she was willing to take part in a joke.

Now of course, the Germans, one of their propaganda things about the English was that we're a nation completely without culture. They always used to refer to England: Das Land ohne Musik, the country without music. And at the start of the war, Hitler made a notorious speech over the radio in which he said that the British were a completely cultureless race and that we had never produced any genius on the level of the great German geniuses. Of course, he was conveniently forgetting Shakespeare and one or two others. Anyway, the BBC put on a rather jokey programme to be broadcast to Germany. And they recruited Myra Hess and the distinguished actor Marius Goring. And they titled this programme, "Britain's Reply to Goering and Hess by Goring and Hess."

Now, I think I've come to a slightly premature halt, but this is my opportunity to ask Lauren to show you this wonderful excerpt, the film. It's from a very famous documentary by Humphrey Jennings. He's a very brilliant, brilliant documentary maker. You could say he was England's answer to Leni Riefenstahl, very adventurous, clever documentary maker. One of his best documentaries is called "Listen to Britain." And it's without any dialogue. It just runs through a whole day from dawn through the 24 hours, different activities going on in Britain. And the message is, of course, that the British are keeping calm and carrying on. And there is a section of it, which is devoted to one of Myra Hess's National Gallery concerts, where she's playing Mozart, surrounded by an orchestra of men in uniform. And it's so wonderful, it tells you so much about these concerts. It really conveys the whole atmosphere of them, that you'll see the rapt faces that Kenneth Clark talks about. You can see the bomb damage, you can see the people eating their sandwiches in the interval. It's attended by the Queen. She's sitting there with a very serene smile on her face, and Sir Kenneth Clark looking very dapper, he's sitting

next to her. So now I'm going to hand you over to Lauren, I hope, and I hope we're going to see this wonderful section of film. Then I'll answer your questions after that. I thank you Lauren.

*Video clip begins*

*Music plays*

*Video clip ends*

I think I'll see if I can answer some questions now. Where they've gone to? Right.

No, Rita. It wasn't vinyl, it's shellac. People, I still keep my shellac record connection, quite different material from vinyl. Vinyl only came later, after the second World War. T

his is Shelly, who lives in a suburb of Chicago. Chicago Classical Radio Station has Dame Myra Hess memorial concerts every Wednesday. That's wonderful to know. I did have music lessons. I was very ungifted and very lazy, so I'm afraid I didn't make very much of it.

Yes, is Sally telling us about the concerts in Chicago? Thank you very much. Oh, Sandy, yes. You also danced the same. It is very danceable music, isn't it? I think the programme said a penny for a ticket. No, I think it was a shilling. I think it was a shilling. Yes she did.

Joyce Grenfell, such a clever woman, Joyce Grenfell, wonderful writer. And she writes very vividly about those concerts and the experience of listening to the music, and how it was listening to music during the second World War.

Yes, Simon's saying, well, yes, a shilling, technically speaking, it is 5p today, but 5p, a shilling then, as you say, would be the equivalent of 4 pounds 15 today. Goodness me, there's inflation for you.

And this is Katrine, whose father attended special end of war concert given by Myra Hess in a packed Albert Hall on the 9th of June, 1945. His ticket was a golden one. In the interval, he's- Oh, missed that. Where is that gone? He was commanded to attend the Royal Box, where joined by an Australian, New Zealander. The Canadian was presented to the Queen and the Princesses, Elizabeth and Margaret. That must have been a wonderful memory for him for the rest of his life. Thank you, Lorna.

The audience in the film as appeared to be mostly men, I suppose that is in a way inevitable, isn't it? I suppose the men were busy doing other things.

Caroline, very emotional. Her father used to attend those concerts. Where did Myra's parents come from? No, she never married, and she never had children. And I assume her family had been in England for some time. I don't think they were first-generation immigrants. That film,

yes, you can buy it, you should be able to, I think on Amazon, you might be able to buy it, because the National Film Theatre certainly put it out on a DVD. So I think you probably could find it. In any case, you can see the whole thing. I hope the sound came across better to you than it did to me. I could hardly hear anything, but you can see it all in quite good sound on YouTube.

Who paid the musicians? They were paid. They were paid a very minimal amount. And actually, I should be able to answer that question, but I can't. I'm not sure who stumped up the money. Maybe it was the government.

Which Mozart concerto? I'm afraid I can't tell you off. Wait, if you look, you can actually see the programme. It does say which Mozart concerto it is. But I can't tell you off the top of my head.

Nigel Lawson related to Myra Hess, I never heard that before.

Did she play in Israel? Her career continued through the 1950s. I'm not absolutely sure if she played in Israel. I'd be surprised if she didn't.

Thank you, Susan.

And yes, that movie clip is so extraordinary, isn't it? It does bring the whole thing to life in a quite amazing way. A wonderful woman. I so regret that- I mean, I suppose I could have met her as a child. She didn't die till 1965. Everything you read about her makes her sound utterly delightful, as well as a great woman and a very talented one.

Thank you all.

The name of the movie is "Listen to Britain," and the director is Humphrey Jennings.

Thank you very much indeed. Oh, is that it? I think that's it. Myra's sister was an accomplished pianist. Lived in Welwyn Garden City.

Right. Thank you all very much indeed. And my next hero is going to be Paul Robeson.