

AUSTRALIAN BIOGRAPHY

SERIES 1

A SERIES THAT PROFILES SOME OF THE MOST
EXTRAORDINARY AUSTRALIANS OF OUR TIME



DAME JOAN HAMMOND

OPERA SINGER



DAME JOAN HAMMOND (1912-1996)

INTRODUCTION

This program is an episode of *Australian Biography* (Series 1) produced under the National Interest Program of Film Australia. This well-established series profiles some of the most extraordinary Australians of our time. Many have had a major impact on the nation's cultural, political and social life. All are remarkable and inspiring people who have reached a stage in their lives where they can look back and reflect. Through revealing in-depth interviews, they share their stories—of beginnings and challenges, landmarks and turning points. In so doing, they provide us with an invaluable archival record and a unique perspective on the roads we, as a country, have travelled.

SYNOPSIS

One of the great opera stars of the two decades following World War Two, Joan Hammond established a wide international following as a soprano on stage and as a recording artist.

Dame Joan was a woman of many talents. While at school, she won the NSW Junior Golf title and would eventually win the NSW Golf Championship three times and be runner-up in the nationals. In her early years, she trained in voice and violin at the Sydney Conservatorium and played violin with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra.

Although her real love was for singing, success in this field did not begin until her talent was recognised by the wife of the then NSW Governor, who raised funds to send her to Vienna in 1936. There she trained under the best tutors of the day.

While striving to maintain her career during the early years of World War Two, she drove an ambulance in London during the Blitz. In 1941, she recorded the Puccini aria, *Oh My Beloved Father*, which became the first classical aria to sell more than a million records. She entertained troops and civilians during the war, even singing in underground air raid shelters and on battleships in northern Scotland.

Returning to Australia in 1946, she resumed her career by singing all the major soprano roles in Europe, the United States and Australia. From 1975 she taught at the Victorian College of the Arts. She was the first artistic director of the Victoria State Opera and in 1974 she was created Dame of the British Empire.

CURRICULUM LINKS

This program will have interest and relevance for teachers and students at secondary and tertiary levels. Curriculum links include English, Drama, Media, History, SOSE/HSIE and Music studies.

Growing up—music and sport

Very early influences in life often decide the ways and directions of our later years; when viewing the program we can easily observe how true this was for Joan Hammond, whose attraction to, and love of both classical music and sports, were nurtured from an early age either in the home or at school.

- Discuss in class, then write a short account of Joan's exposure to classical music when very young, and the later relevance of her school years to her interest and proficiency in sports activities.
- By the late 1920s and into the early 1930s Joan looked set for a career in classical music and fame as a champion golfer. Was it easier, somehow, to succeed in more than one field in Joan's day? Discuss in class and write notes on whether it would be possible today to excel at a high standard in two different disciplines at the same time. Are there various kinds of constraints and other difficulties today that may prevent this from happening? Have you been, are you now, or are you likely to be in the situation of having to make a serious choice to give up one endeavour to pursue a career or excellence in another? (For one contemporary sports example see 'Juggling two talents' in the website references.)
- Plan, draft, edit and proofread a fiction short story based on the details Joan tells us in the program about the bicycle accident she had, and its aftermath, which affected her development as a violinist with the Sydney Symphony Orchestra (and possibly her status as a champion New South Wales golfer). The story does not specifically have to be about Joan; you may present it in any way you think appropriate. For example, you may wish to write the story in the past tense using a third-person narrator or perhaps in first-person, present-tense diary format.
- Describe in writing the circumstances which led to Joan being championed by who she refers to as 'my fairy godmother', Lady Zara Gowrie. Carry out some research on Lady Gowrie and add a paragraph of relevant biographical detail about her. How did Lady Gowrie organise Joan's costs to travel to Europe to study music?
- Following from the previous activity, write a set of personal diary entries capturing what you might imagine to be Joan's thoughts and feelings about being offered her 'big break'. How obligated would she feel? Would she be afraid of letting her supporters down through not succeeding? Would she be feeling sad or exulted about suddenly travelling far from home to a foreign land?

Vienna, pre-war years

By the time Joan Hammond arrived in Vienna, in 1936, Austria had already been experiencing tumultuous and violent times throughout the previous few years and was heading for more of the same. Many Austrians were of German descent and strongly supported *Anschluss*, or unification with Adolf Hitler's Third Reich in Nazi Germany, across the north-western border (Hitler was, himself, born in Austria). In March 1938 Nazi Germany took control of the Austrian government, and immediately

backed this up by sending in troops to maintain order. This was but one of the events of those times that directly led to World War Two breaking out in September 1939.

- In pairs, carry out research on the history of Austria from approximately 1933 to **Anschluss** in 1938, and present a timeline of significant events affecting Austria during these years. Present the timeline on poster display paper and include explanatory notes and illustrations where applicable.
- Continuing from the previous activity, carry out further research if necessary and write a short account of the Vienna that Joan may have found herself in on arrival in 1936. For example, in what ways may she have found life in Vienna different from anything she would have known in Sydney? Was Vienna a violent place? Was it openly anti-Semitic at that time?
- While training as an opera singer, Joan lived in the same mountain palace as the Vienna Boys' Choir. Could you turn any part of this into a scene, or a sequence of scenes, for a film? Would it be a comedy? Working in pairs or small groups, plan a storyboard of camera shots and dialogue. Include other instructions as required (for example, the addition of music and other incidental sound).
- Carry out some research into the history and activities of the Vienna Boys' Choir, then prepare a poster display about it. An alternative may be to write an article about the choir for a magazine designed for young teenagers. You may also wish to research and include details about Australia's famous historical connection to the choir, when the choir boys were stranded on tour in Australia on the outbreak of war in 1939. (See website references.)
- Based on Joan's observations and on further research, plan and write a short story about a European *mischling* in the pre-war years. (See website references.)
- During the program Joan says that as she was only reading the Austrian newspapers she did not realise that war was approaching. As though you were Joan, write a letter home to a friend or relative in Australia about your experiences. Write an answering letter back to Joan. Would this letter enlighten her as to what is really happening in Austria, Germany and other parts of Europe?
- Joan comments that it was very difficult to access British newspapers while in Vienna. In pairs, carry out some research about British newspapers during the pre-World War Two era, then, using desktop publishing software, create a British newspaper front page which contains at least one news report about events in Austria and Germany. If your front page is larger than one A4-sized sheet, arrange each different item that will make up the full page onto larger poster paper. Such items may include: newspaper title banner, the date and price of the newspaper, weather forecast, photos and other illustrations, advertisements, a BBC radio listening guide and various news reports, with headlines.

London, World War Two

Joan Hammond also studied opera and languages in Italy and England. She arrived in London in 1937, and although she toured to many countries after that for recitals and opera performances (including a return to Vienna in 1939 only months before war broke out), she made London her home for the next quarter of a century. (See 'Joan Hammond' in website references.)

- Joan arrived in London in 1937 for the coronation of King George VI. This grand occasion had followed a royal scandal a short time earlier, involving the abdication of Edward VIII from the throne. Carry out some research about both of these events, the reasons for them and their significance today, then prepare a magazine-style presentation on the issue, aimed at a young teenage readership. Include illustrations as required.
- Write a short, selective biography in about 500 words on the famous orchestra conductor for whom Joan auditioned, Sir Thomas Beecham. What were the notable events and achievements of his career?
- Research and in your own words write a commentary in 200-300 words on what became known as the wartime London Blitz, referred to in some detail by Joan during the program. (An alternative to this may be to construct a poster display.)
- Joan was an ambulance driver for the Women's Voluntary Service (WVS) in London during the war. Research and write a short item about the work of the WVS during the war years. Add extra information about what became of the WVS after the war. Is it still in existence today? (See 'Women's Voluntary Service' in website references.)
- Design a recruitment poster or website page for the Women's Voluntary Service.
- Referring to her time as an ambulance driver, Joan comments that, despite her damaged arm and the pain she still experienced many years later, '...there are many things you're not meant to do (that) you have to do on occasions'. Have you found yourself in this type of situation? Plan and give a short talk to the class about your experience. What was the situation, what decision did you make and why, and what was the outcome?
- Drawing on information from the program and further research, plan and write a short fiction story about being a volunteer ambulance driver during the London Blitz.
- During the war, Joan recorded 'Oh My Beloved Father', from Puccini's one-act opera, **Gianni Schicchi**. If possible, listen to this recording then discuss in class why you think it became so popular during those years and why it became the first-ever piece of recorded opera music to sell one million copies.

Later career

After World War Two Joan Hammond toured to many parts of the world, including Europe, the USA, India, Soviet Russia and South Africa. She returned to Australia for performances in 1946 and 1952, and also supported the development of the Elizabethan Trust Opera Company, the forerunner of Opera Australia, when it was formed later in the 1950s. She toured, recorded, gave recitals and took part in operas on the stage, on radio and television until her health declined in the mid-1960s.

- As we see in the 1946 Cinesound Review newsreel during the program, amid great fanfare Joan returned to Australia after a 10-year absence. Later, we see newspaper headlines referring to her stage performances as 'disappointing'. Using

these events as a starting-point, plan and write a sequence of personal diary entries, as though you were Joan, reflecting on your feelings about returning to Australia as a now-famous star of opera, when a decade earlier you had left the country relatively unknown. Also include your thoughts and feelings about the gruelling nature of your tour, the strain and tiredness, and the effects of the war years taking their toll. What do you feel about the negative newspaper headlines: Are they justified, fair?

- Plan and write a short story drawing on Joan's memories of what happened when she 'slighted' the revered Mrs Eleanor Roosevelt, widow of the three-time President of the USA, Franklin D. Roosevelt. The characters, settings and events may be entirely fictional; you do not have to write about Joan and Mrs Roosevelt specifically and accurately. Decide also on the point of view of the narrative voice, which may be very important in affecting the way the story is perceived and emotionally experienced by readers.
- In 1959 Joan appeared in the first British staging of Antonin Dvořák's 1901 opera, *Rusalka*; a film clip from the opera is presented during the program. Find out what the plot-line of the opera is and the story it was originally based on, then either create an advertisement or a website page to promote a performance of the opera, making it accessible, entertaining and interesting to a modern-day audience. (See '*Rusalka*' in website references.)
- In small groups, take any idea or aspect of the *Rusalka* story and devise a short play for sound (rather than for visual presentation) that could either be enacted to an audience as a script reading or recorded as though for radio or for playback on your school's intranet. Rehearse and revise the script as necessary. If recorded, you may wish to include a narrator, sound effects and music.

Retirement from the stage

Persistent and worsening heart problems forced Joan Hammond to retire from public performance in 1965. Despite this, though, after a period of recuperation she returned to conduct master classes to students of operatic singing and later taught privately and at Melbourne University. Her autobiography was written in 1970.

- Joan comments in the program that she tried to ignore her heart problems until they were diagnosed. Imagine yourself in her shoes. Write a letter (or an email) to a friend, expressing your feelings about this, and the period of non-active recuperation you are facing. You may wish to include an imagined conversation between yourself and your physician, in which the realities of the situation, on both sides, are laid bare.
- Prepare and write a newspaper report in 250-350 words, 'Joan Hammond retires'. You may consider using direct interview quotes as part of your report, drawing them from the program if desired.
- In 1974 Joan was appointed a Dame of the British Empire. What does this entail? Carry out research on this, and construct either a poster or a website page about the history and purpose of this award, whether any rights and privileges accompany it, and whether there are any other notable Australian women who have been similarly honoured. Include illustrations as required. As the British Empire no longer exists and may be considered an outmoded institution, is there an equivalent award today for Australians?
- When asked what is the most important lesson she has ever been taught during her life, Joan replies, 'I hope it's humility'. Discuss in class what you think she means by this. Drawing on the program and from any further biographical research you have done, how would you characterise Joan Hammond's qualities, her achievements and her life?

Media Studies

Carry out the following activities:

- The program does not start in chronological order of the events in Joan's life, nor does it begin with a 'typical' establishing camera shot. In what way does the program begin in terms of on-screen content, visually and aurally? Discuss in class the possible reasons for this directorial choice.
- Following from the previous activity, discuss the effect and purpose of the program's concluding soundtrack, taken from the opera *La Forza del Destino* by Giuseppe Verdi.
- Draft, write, edit and proofread a review of the program in about 300-400 words for a popular TV magazine or website.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES

Books

(Note that a new biography of Dame Joan Hammond, written by Sara Hardy will be published by Allen & Unwin towards the end of 2008.)

Evan Burr Bukey, *Hitler's Austria: Popular Sentiment in the Nazi Era 1938-1945*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2000

John Cargher, *Bravo! Two Hundred Years of Opera in Australia*, Macmillan, South Melbourne, 1988

Dame Joan Hammond, *A Voice, A Life: Autobiography*, Gollancz, London, 1970

James Hinton, *Women, Social Leadership, and the Second World War: Continuities of Class*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2002

Roger Parker (ed.), *The Oxford Illustrated History of Opera*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1994

George Rodger, *The Blitz: The Photography of George Rodger*, Penguin, London, 1990

Andrew Thorpe, *Britain in the 1930s: The Deceptive Decade*, Blackwell, Cambridge, MA, 1992

Jane Waller and Michael Vaughan-Rees, *Blitz: The Civilian War, 1940-45*, Optima, London, 1990

Film and TV

Peter Campbell (producer), *Joan Hammond*, Australia Council archival film series (videorecording), 1984

Websites

Sir Thomas Beecham:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thomas_Beecham

Coronation of George VI, 1937:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_VI_of_the_United_Kingdom

www.archive.org/details/1937-05-18_The_Coronation_of_King_George_VI

Lady Gowrie:

www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A090682b.htm

www.gowrie-adelaide.com.au/cms/?q=node/22

Joan Hammond:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joan_Hammond

<https://musicaustralia.org.au/>

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms8648>

La Forza del Destino:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/La_forza_del_destino

Mischling:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mischling>

Nazi Austria:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Austrofascism>

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anschluss>

<http://fcit.usf.edu/Holocaust/resource/REVIEWS/Bukey.HTM>

Rusalka (note the link on this site to Dvořák's opera):

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rusalka>

Vienna Boys' Choir:

www.aboutvienna.org/composers/vienna_boys_choir.htm

www.bach-cantatas.com/Books/Book-Lorenz-ViennaBoys.htm

www.abc.net.au/gnt/history/Transcripts/s1071232.htm

Women's Voluntary Service:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/WRVS>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ww2peopleswar/categories/c54954/>

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A Film Australia National Interest Program

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Executive Producer: Ron Saunders

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