



Joan Alston Sutherland
(1926–2010)

Portrait of Dame Joan Sutherland in New York. 1975
Photograph by Allan Warren.

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A first glimpse of the late Dame Joan Sutherland's name in the list of the Academy's Honorary Fellows is liable to induce a mixture of responses. It can seem a more-than-merited recognition of her unassailable and overwhelmingly deserved fame combined with a slightly dissonant awareness of her view of the world and her approach to the art of singing. Among other Honorary Fellows recognised primarily as practitioners of the arts, the election of writers, for example, pays tribute to their mastery of the language in which the Academy transacts its business and formulates its policies and ideas, a mastery that can be esteemed for its own sake, even if it is necessarily not quite independent of any academic prowess they may also possess.

Honorary Fellows renowned primarily for their skill in musical performance, in contrast, use a professional language regrettably rare in the Academy's transactions but very often exercise, in addition, an allied scholarly bent. The late Sir Charles Mackerras, for instance, had a formidable eye and ear for textual accuracy in the scores he conducted and a vigorously documented awareness of historical precedents and practice in instrumental style and vocal ornamentation. Sutherland, on the other hand, possessed a different way of looking at those aspects of singing in which she was unequalled in recently remembered times. Her attitude was primarily a combination of instinct and prudent commonsense. She had a sceptical approach to any theories that went beyond being a practical formula for accuracy in pitch, articulation, tone colour and expressiveness, and was the sort of person who would usually find the minutiae of research and the discussion of those minutiae wearisome in the extreme.

Yet her partnership with her colleague and husband Richard Bonyngé in the revival and reinterpretation of Italian and French operas – particularly those of the first half of the nineteenth century – amounted to a collective and prolonged programme of historical investigation, one that presented its results in international sequences of staged performances substantially rebalancing the repertoires of major opera houses in recent decades. Bonyngé, a lifelong collector of historically important scores and

other source material, was the researcher, planner and director of the process, Sutherland the superlative and exemplary instrument of its delivery. If that makes her role seem too passive and obedient for comfort, it needs to be remembered that it was Sutherland who had to fulfil, on every occasion on which she performed music from this repertory, a universal expectation that she would sing with accuracy and brilliance the agile, high-flying, often intricately decorated vocal lines habitually allotted to her. Was her consistency of skill and stamina in this music surpassed in the last two hundred years? It would not be hard to believe that it may have been rarely matched in that time. Her physical hardihood (despite a prolonged earlier battle with chronic sinusitis and a necessary gamble on a dangerous operation at the very beginning of her international career) was outstanding, enabling her to meet her operatic and concert-giving commitments with a rarely matched reliability.

The only other Australian singer whose international renown was of a similar order, indeed one arguably even greater in her own lifetime, was Melba, whose repertory of operatic Italian and French heroines quite frequently overlaps that of Sutherland without sharing the extent of its exploration of Donizettian and Bellinian opera or of such difficult rarities of French opera as Massenet's *Esclarmonde*. Melba (Helen Porter Mitchell) had one kind of achievement to her credit that is lacking in Sutherland's curriculum vitae. Melba was one of the singers who helped establish Puccini's *La Bohème* as a staple of the operatic repertory, beginning her long tally of performances in its principal female role of Mimì in years when the opera was still a novelty.

Sutherland was not as lucky as her predecessor in finding simultaneously such a readily saleable contemporary work and so sympathetic a leading role; but in any case it has to be acknowledged that she was not very interested in the new operas of her time. She shared Melba's musicianly accuracy and agility, and the circumstance of Scottish descent, but seems to have surpassed her by a considerable margin in the size and fullness of her voice. The word 'seems' has to be used here because many of Melba's recordings, belonging to the earliest years of acoustic recording, may well give the impression that her voice was smaller and more narrowly confined in tone than it was. The famous Mapleson cylinder recordings of Melba hint at a bigger sound, though it is difficult to imagine than it can have rivalled Sutherland's in this respect.

The burgeoning of Sutherland's operatic career coincided with a series of rapid developments in modern recording standards; and it is beyond doubt that the splendour of her voice and musicianship will be fully apparent to future generations from her very extensive catalogue of sound recordings. Video recordings of her stage performances in many of her most favoured operatic roles are usually of lesser sound quality but at least ensure that her theatrical presence and appearance and her genuine if limited histrionic gifts (not least in such comedy roles as that of Marie in Donizetti's *La fille du régiment*) will testify to her patiently acquired achievement as a singer-actress.

A comparison inevitably made with Sutherland's interpretation of Bellini's *Norma*, to take one salient example, rests on the undoubtedly more intense and striking dramatic gifts of Maria Callas in this role. Callas, however, seriously lacked the durability and certainty of Sutherland's vocal endowment, particularly in those operatic characterisations requiring beauty and steadiness of tone. The result is that, though the legend of Callas's abilities will persist and will be supported by the evidence of a relatively small number of recordings, the rapid and distressing decline in the upper register of her voice makes careful listening to many of her recorded performances, at least in terms of their sound, something of an ordeal. Sutherland, quite strongly criticised on occasion for sacrificing verbal enunciation to tone quality and extended phrasing, gives unstinted pleasure from the sheer sound of her recordings. It is likely that her reputation, far from fading as a result of the available evidence of the sound of her voice, will grow even further. The currency of her recordings will also serve as a reminder that most singers who develop the agility, range and accuracy necessary to sing the florid music of many of the heroines of operas by Donizetti, Bellini, Rossini, Verdi, Handel and others cannot match the fullness, carrying-power, grace and expressiveness of tone and style consistently offered by Sutherland.

Sutherland founded her singing, and her belief that it was a natural phenomenon of living, on the experience of listening from earliest childhood to the evidently talented and purposeful singing of her mother, born Muriel Alston, a mezzo-soprano who might well have pursued, in her daughter's estimation, a career of her own but who disliked the thought of public performance. Sutherland may have inherited her robust physique from her father's Scottish forebears in the far north of Scotland (where the territory of Sutherland represents in its naming the geographical orientation of Scandinavian seafarers). Her mother's belief that serious vocal schooling should not be attempted before a student's late teens may have slowed the beginnings of her daughter's career but, much more importantly, ensured that her vocal equipment was in its first freshness when singing became her mode of making her way in the world and, at the same time, avoided the damage sometimes inflicted by premature training. Her mother's catholic repertory as a singer made the idioms of operetta, musical comedy and older styles of popular song as naturally accessible to her as those of art song and opera. The experience of growing up in a Sydney suburban household laid the foundations of her unaffected personal manner, her easy informality with her professional colleagues and her ability to shine in such pieces as *The Merry Widow* (*Die lustige Witwe*) and *Die Fledermaus* and to record with genuine flair the songs of Noël Coward, accompanied by their author in his friendly capacity as the Bonynges' expatriate neighbour in Switzerland. It also helped to place her in a relationship to many members of her Australian audiences comparable in its reciprocal affection with that enjoyed by such beloved musical comedy heroines (though, of course, lesser singers) of yesteryear as Gladys Moncrieff.

Sutherland's Australian origins, always evident in her manner and speech, yielded an artistic result in her home country that was as remarkable as it was unprecedented. When her international career was still at its height she and Bonyng began in 1974 to make virtually annual visits to appear with the Australian Opera (later Opera Australia) in the company's regular seasons. Sutherland and Bonyng had toured the country in 1965 with a specially constituted Sutherland-Williamson company formed after the model of the Melba-Williamson touring companies earlier in the century. This 1965 visit, the first opportunity for Australian audiences to see and hear Sutherland in Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor* and some of her other internationally praised roles, was firmly in the tradition of the temporarily returning tours undertaken by many Australian singers and instrumentalists in the wake of success in Europe and/or America. The 15 seasons of Australian performances in which Sutherland took part between 1974 and 1990, amounting to more than three hundred performances (almost all of them opera stagings and most of them in Sydney Opera House) and excepting only the years 1975 and 1987, were something new. For the first time an Australian singer of the highest rank regularly made opera performances in her home city an integral part of a very active international schedule. Nor were these appearances simply repetitions of roles already learned and presented elsewhere. Sutherland's first appearances in the title role of Puccini's *Suor Angelica*, as Elettra in Mozart's *Idomeneo* and as Amalia in Verdi's *I Masnadieri* all took place in her home city and with a company of which Bonyng became musical director. Gratifying to Australians as Sutherland's overseas successes had been, this was more significant in that it represented a decisive shift from the formerly intermittent and quasi-colonial relationship between Australian singers of very high degree and their country of origin.

Dame Joan Sutherland, who died on 12 October 2010, received, in addition to her appointment as a Companion of the Order of Australia and as one of the twenty-four members of the Order of Merit, election as an Honorary FAHA in 2008. She would have been pleased, I think, to know that the Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre, named after her in Sydney's western extremity of Penrith, is known affectionately to the local press and public as 'The Joan'.

Roger Covell