

3 Limerick singers among all-time greats

THREE singers from Limerick figure among 27 that author Gus Smith selected to tell the enthralling story of Opera in Ireland for more than a century and a half. They are soprano Catherine Hayes, tenor Joseph O'Mara and soprano Suzanne Murphy, and their profiles are included alongside those of John McCormack, Margaret Burke Sheridan, James Johnson, Veronica Dunne, Dermot Troy, Ann Murray, Virginia Kerr and a dozen others, past as well as present.

'Irish Stars of the Opera' draws on new material to trace the careers of these artists while at the same time spotlighting the development of opera in the country. 'Joseph O'Mara was a phenomenon,' says Gus Smith, 'and the great pity is that the recordings available of his voice do not do justice to him.'

They fail to give any clear impression that he was a tenor who could sing a great Wagnerian role like Lohengrin as well as Verdi or Puccini heroes. Of course as an actor/singer he was superb and such was his popularity with Dublin audiences that his operatic company was invited to play the Gaiety Theatre for two seasons each year.'

Likewise, the book charts the greatness of Catherine Hayes, a recognised diva who in the mid-1800s was acclaimed at La Scala, Milan and other leading European opera houses.

Later on, Margaret Burke Sheridan would pay tribute to Catherine when she said,



Top trio: Catherine Hayes, Joseph O'Mara and Suzanne Murphy.

'When I first went to Italy to sing I heard of her brilliant reputation. I was so proud to come after her and keep the name of Ireland high in the operatic firmament.'

Years later Suzanne Murphy followed in both these divas' footsteps as she sang with increasing success in Vienna, Munich and elsewhere. The book traces her remarkable career, from Ireland to Wales and to her eventual rise to international fame.

Gus Smith says he was fortunate to have seen some of Suzanne's finest performances and in this respect considers her Elvira in Bellini's *I Puritani* as her most memorable bel canto role. As he recalls in 'Irish Stars of the Opera': 'Her all-round performance was superb, especially her Mad Scene, and her final scene with tenor Dennis O'Neill was riveting.'

He expresses disappointment that the DGOS did not let the Irish opera public see

her in this part, although the society did present Suzanne in another of her unforgettable portrayals, that of Norma. The question is also discussed about Convent Garden's reluctance to engage her, especially to sing Tosca.

Other questions raised in the book include: a) Why did John McCormack retire at a comparatively young age from opera?; b) Why didn't Margaret Burke Sheridan seek fame and fortune in America?; c) Why did Belfast tenor James Johnston leave Convent Garden so abruptly?; d) Why did the world of opera mourn deeply the death in the 1960s of Dermot Troy?

One of the surprises of the book is undoubtedly the profile of Josef Locke who for years has been known as a top rate variety performer. However, as a young tenor of 22 he sang five important operatic roles with the DGOS and, in fact, helped the society out of a spot

during the war years in the 1940s when foreign singers were unable to come to Dublin.

It is both amusing and controversial chapter, for today Locke claims that he was snubbed by John McCormack. After a performance of 'La Gioconda' in the early forties at the Gaiety Theatre, McCormack was invited on stage to meet the cast of principals, but it seems that when he came to Locke (who was then known as Joseph McLoughlin) he merely said, "I don't think you should make opera your career."

Good judges of singing claimed at the time that Locke would have developed into a first-class operetta singer if given the opportunity to train abroad. "There was no money in Opera," says Locke in the book. "I nearly starved on the money I got in Dublin."

'Irish Stars of the Opera' also contains 32 pages of

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KLM choose Aerospace

SHANNON Aerospace this Thursday night announced that they had signed a multi-million pound deal with KLM, the national airline of the Netherlands, to carry out a three-year maintenance agreement.

The contract is for D-checks on ten Boeing 737s and 300s, and includes the stripping and painting of the aircraft.

Great crack at Crescent

CRESCENT Shopping Centre, celebrating their 21st anniversary this month, and are marking the occasion with a super family Funday this Saturday.

Starting at noon, a range of events has been organised. These include clowns, face painting, puppet shows, live theatre, a colouring competition, magicians and special cartoon guests.

Weather

DESPITE this Friday afternoon's sunny spells, at 14-15°, it will cloud up again with rain extending across the Limerick region by evening, accompanied by strong southerly winds. Mostly cloudy, this Saturday, with showers or longer spells of rain.

Cut-off

WATER supplies to St Mary's Park were cut off for three hours, at 9.45 am this Thursday, for essential maintenance work.

Quenched

LIMERICK Fire Brigade put out a fire in a shed near King John's Castle this Thursday afternoon.

Gus Smith

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historic photographs. Gus Smith says he was given the photo of Joseph O'Mara by the late James N Healy in Cork and that it is one of the very few available of the great Limerick-born tenor.