

# With a song in her heart

LIMERICK'S Suzanne Murphy looked radiant as we spoke in the quiet surrounds of the Allegro Restaurant in the Atrium of the University Concert Hall. It was Thursday, a few days before the opening performance of Wager's four-night marathon that had not been performed in this country since 1913.

"The sound of the orchestra would knock your socks off. Wagner's is real grown up music but it is intellectually profound and it takes a while for you to appreciate the beauty of the harmony. I flew over to Limerick last Sunday. It's always nice to come home and getting the opportunity to perform in the Wagner Ring for the first time is special."

I remarked on her nails. They looked sculptured and the deep red made them impossible to ignore.

She laughed heartily: "I had a few spare hours the other day and decided to paint them. I never go for manicures. I keep breaking them when I am playing piano." Regarded as the most outstanding female operatic performer to emerge from this city over the past century, Suzanne Murphy has been a freelance singer since 1983. She came from a musical household and from the age of 10 until she completed her Leaving Certificate examination when she was 18, she received her education as a boarder at Bruff FCJ.

"My grandparents on my mother's side lived in Bruff so I felt close to home. My father was originally from Wolfe Tone Street

and the family ran a plumbing supply business in Roches Street. "I remember being in Kilkee on holiday and meeting Fr Bates and Fr McMahon of the Cecilian Musical Society. My mother would insist that I sang for them. I loved the shows at the Crescent Theatre and I would go home and almost beg my mother to allow me to join the society. Even at quite a young age I wanted to sing at every possible opportunity."

Suzanne's love of music blossomed when she left secondary school. After a few memorable performances with the Cecilians she took a diversion in her musical career that was to change her life.

"It was generally known in Limerick that I had a good voice and maybe it was the bit of a rebel in me that saw me take up the offer to form a folk group called We 4. The group consisted of myself on vocals, Larry 'Lance' Hogan on percussion, John Harrington on double bass and Denis Mowatt on guitar. Donal Lunny came in for a time before we broke up in 1972." We 4 brought an entirely new concept to the Irish entertainment scene.

"The acoustic presentation of close harmonies and original songs, fronted by the tall figure of a light opera singer, was an unlikely combination that was soon on the front cover of Irish pop magazine, Spotlight.

When the group split up, Suzanne decided to have her voice professionally trained.

"The BBC rang me and asked me if I would be interested in doing a tv programme for them. I thought that it was the group that they wanted but they obviously thought I was good enough to go it alone.

"Now it was time to take this singing thing serious so I rang Ronnie Dunne in Dublin to take a few singing lessons. I had never, up to that point, sang on my own."

Veronica Dunne immediately recognised the potential of the Murphy voice. This was a talent that had to be nurtured and by 1976 Suzanne Murphy had been snapped up on contract by the Welsh National Opera. Since then she has performed in all the top venues throughout the world although she still has a few ambitions left.

"I never performed in Russia or in the Middle East and of those two Russia appeals to me most. If I had one major ambition left, visiting Russia would be well up there in my priorities.

"Much of my time is now taken up tutoring and teaching at the Royal College of Music and Drama in Cardiff and at the Irish Academy of Music in Dublin.

"I teach advanced students and I find it both interesting and challenging.

"There is often a bit of psychology involved in trying to open the doors of young people's minds. It often takes a few years for young singers to actually grasp the important points of operatic performance."

While almost all of her performing career has been centered on theatre performances, earlier this year, Suzanne accepted an offer to headline a classical music cruise. Her sister, Noelle, travelled with her on the trip that took them from Venice to Corfu and on to Istanbul, Athens, Kos and Naples. It was an experience that she enjoyed tremendously.

"It was certainly something different for me but it was terribly enjoyable. I never worked so hard. I did 12 concerts during the 14 days and most of the stuff that we sang was German Lieder."

She is a most gracious person. Her speaking tones barely surpass the level of audibility and despite her very high profile in the world of music, she admits to being "rather shy and never one who mixed terribly well when I was young.

"I am actually careful where I go during my leisure hours. My voice is my livelihood and I have to protect it. I don't go to football matches, for instance, and try to rest my vocal chords as much as possible. My brother, Michael, is very involved in rugby in Limerick and keeps trying to get me to go to see Old Crescent play."

While her recording of the parish anthem,

"There Is An Isle is now regarded as a classic, it was only by chance that the Limerick soprano decided to include the song on the her Irish album, which is on the Columbia label.

"Michael rang me and asked if I had ever heard the song. I said, 'no', so he sang a verse into the telephone. Halfway through the song I was crying. I had never heard such a beautiful song and immediately my mind was made up to include it in the album. "Michael somehow managed to get the music for the song. I gave it to the musical director of the Welsh Opera who arranged it for orchestra and voice and made some chord changes.

"Because I have been away for so long I had never heard it before and had no idea that it was a rugby anthem in Limerick. On hearing it for the first time it was emotional for me. I was alone in my house in Cardiff and here was my brother singing these beautiful words through the telephone about 'our bonny isle,' which at the time I believed was about Ireland."

While Suzanne Murphy has not been honoured by our city fathers for her achievements on the world stage, the awards that have been bestowed upon her are well deserved and quite significant. She has been bestowed with a Doctorate of Music at the University of Glamorgan and, of course, was more recently honoured by receiving a Doctorate at the University of Limerick. She is also a Fellow of Cardiff University and a Fellow of the Royal Welsh College of Music and Drama. It was the awarding of the doctorate at the University of Limerick,

however, that has meant most to her.

"I remember the morning that the letter arrived from UL. I was in the hall at home in Cardiff and wondered, what could this be? When I opened it I was absolutely floored. I walked down the hall where a picture of my late dad, Joe, hangs and I held up the letter to him and said: 'now look at what I have achieved'.

"That ceremony was a very emotional moment for me. Being acknowledged in your home town is always something special for performers and receiving that honour is something that I dearly treasure.

"I have been very lucky in my career and these are honours that you never dream will come your way."

On Monday and Tuesday of this week, Suzanne Murphy added another first to her almost endless list of performances when she sang for the first time in the Wagner Ring at the University Concert Hall.

Some 900 people packed the auditorium on Bank Holiday Monday and on both occasions Suzanne's performance was exceptional. Suzanne has changed little since her days in Limerick and the number of people of approached her during our interview last week emphasised her popularity. "Even when I am performing abroad Limerick people come backstage to congratulate me and have a chat. They talk about Limerick in the 1960s and 1970s as if I had never left home," she said.

## Crowley promises to fight CAP reform 'tooth and nail'

A MUNSTER Fianna Fail MEP "is deeply angered" at any attempts being made by the EU Agricultural Commissioner, Franz Fischler, to renegotiate the Berlin Agreement of EU leaders governing the operation of the Common Agricultural Policy for the period 2000-2006.

"We all recall that EU leaders at Berlin agreed

brought some level of stability to Irish and European farmers.

"The bottom line is that EU leaders in Berlin agreed in 1999 the workings of the CAP for a seven year period. EU leaders did agree to put in place a review of the CAP beginning in the year 2003 but no more than that. A review of the CAP does not mean a

for the operation of Irish agriculture than any

behalf of Irish farmers known at every

despite the best scaremongering tactics

places us near the top of the EU league and as

market and the new business opportunities



### EUROLINK SOUTH

By BRIAN McLAUGHLIN in association with the European Union

that are at stake for Ireland in the context of its relationship with the European Union.

The Minister made the following key points during this launch: membership of the Union has been and remains absolutely fundamental to our prosperity and economic success.

does not.

- we have emerged successfully from tough negotiations in the past. And we will negotiate equally effectively in the future including issues like CAP.

- in the debate on the Future of the Union, we are determined to advance our own vision, one in which the