

MYRA  
HESS

*The complete  
solo and  
concerto  
studio  
recordings*

april



with good wishes

Hess

MYRA  
HESS

**The complete 78-rpm solo and concerto recordings  
and complete HMV LP recordings**



## ① The American Columbia Recordings, 1928–1931

(78.51)

- |  |  |        |
|--|--|--------|
| 1. BACH/HESS <b>Jesu, joy of man's desiring</b>                      | 17 January 1928; 2063-M; matrix W 145543-2                         | (3.18) |
| 2. BACH <b>Gigue</b> from French Suite No 5 in G, BWV816             | 17 January 1928; 2063-M; matrix W 145542-2                         | (3.20) |
| 3. BACH <b>Prelude &amp; Fugue in C sharp</b> BWV848 from WTC I      | 23 April 1929; 1951-D; matrix W 148375-2                           | (3.21) |
| 4. BACH <b>Allegro</b> from Toccata in G major, BWV916               | 23 April 1929; 1951-D; matrix W 148376-4                           | (1.58) |
| 5. SCARLATTI <b>Sonata in C minor</b> L352 (Kk11)                    | 14 March 1928; 168-M; matrix W 145638-7                            | (1.58) |
| 6. SCARLATTI <b>Sonata in C major</b> L104 (Kk159)                   | ———— " ————  | (1.40) |
| SCHUBERT <b>Sonata in A major</b> D664                               |  |        |
| 7. <b>Allegro moderato</b>   | 16/17 February 1928  | (7.49) |
| 8. <b>Andante</b>  | 67417/9-D; matrices W 98460-2, 98461-4, 98463-2, 98462-4 & 98464-1 | (5.21) |
| 9. <b>Finale: Allegro</b>  |  | (5.13) |
| 10. SCHUBERT/GANZ <b>Ballet music from 'Rosamunde'</b>               | 17 February 1928; 67419-D; matrix W 98465-3                        | (3.52) |
| 11. BEETHOVEN <b>Bagatelle in B flat major</b> Op 119 No 11          | 14 March 1928; 168-M; matrix W 145656-7                            | (1.59) |
| 12. BRAHMS <b>Intermezzo in C major</b> Op 119 No 3                  | ———— " ————  | (1.43) |
| 13. BRAHMS <b>Capriccio in B minor</b> Op 76 No 2                    | 26 April 1929; 50199-D; matrix W 98654-2                           | (3.25) |
| 14. SCHUMANN <b>Vogel als Prophet</b> Op 82 No 7                     | 23 March 1931; 2512-D; matrix W 151458-1                           | (3.35) |
| 15. MENDELSSOHN <b>Song without Words</b> Op 38 No 6 'Duetto'        | 3 May 1929; 50199-D; matrix W 98657-4                              | (2.43) |
| 16. MENDELSSOHN <b>Song without Words</b> Op 67 No 4 'Spinning Song' | ———— " ————  | (1.46) |
| 17. PALMGREN <b>Cradle song</b> Preludes Op 17, No 9                 | 26 April 1929; 2512-D; matrix W 148473-4                           | (3.24) |
| 18. RAVEL <b>Pavane pour une infante défunte</b>                     | 19 January 1928; 157-M; matrices W 145545-1/6-1                    | (5.52) |
| 19. DEBUSSY <b>Poissons d'or</b> Images, Book 2 No 3                 | 17 February 1928; 7151-M; matrix W 98466-3                         | (3.49) |
| 20. DEBUSSY <b>La fille aux cheveux de lin</b> Préludes I, No 8      | 17 February 1928; 7151-M; matrix W 98467-2                         | (2.21) |
| 21. DEBUSSY <b>Minstrels</b> Préludes I, No 12                       | ———— " ————  | (2.07) |
| 22. GRIFFES <b>The white peacock</b> Op 7 No 1                       | 3 May 1929; 50149-D; matrix W 98656-3                              | (4.34) |
| 23. FALLA <b>Ritual fire dance from 'El amor brujo'</b>              | 3 May 1929; 50149-D; matrix W 98658-2                              | (3.42) |

② The English Columbia Recordings, 1933

(80.43)

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|---|---|--------|
| 1. FIELD <b>Nocturne No 4 in A major</b>                              | 17 October 1933; DB 1232; matrix CA 14064-1 | (3.39) |
| 2. CHOPIN <b>Nocturne in F sharp major Op 15 No 2</b>                 | 17 October 1933; DB 1232; matrix CA 14065-2 | (3.34) |
| 3. MACDOWELL <b>AD MDCXX Op 55 No 3</b>                               | 17 October 1933; DB 1235; matrix CA 14063-1 | (2.51) |
| 4. DVOŘÁK <b>Slavonic Dance Op 46 No 1</b> (duet with Hamilton Harty) | 17 October 1933; DB 1235; matrix CA 14066-1 | (3.28) |

The HMV 78-rpm recordings, 1937–1949

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|--|--|---------|
| 5. PURCELL/HESS <b>Saraband; Minuet; Air</b>             | 1 February 1943; C 3337; matrix 2EA 9964-4           | (4.43)  |
| 6. SCARLATTI <b>Sonata in G major L387 (Kk14)</b>        | 9 January 1940; B 9035; matrix 0EA 8341-1            | (2.53)  |
| 7. BACH/HESS <b>Jesu, joy of man's desiring</b>          | 9 January 1940; B 9035; matrix 0EA 8340-3            | (3.31)  |
| 8. BACH/HESS <b>Adagio</b> from BWV564                   | 17 November 1949; C 3960; matrix 2EA 14297-1         | (4.29)  |
| 9. BACH <b>Prelude in D major BWV936</b>                 | 17 November 1949; C 3960; matrix 2EA 14296-1D        | (2.29)  |
| HAYDN <b>Sonata in D major Hob XVI:37</b>                | 12 January 1945; unpublished on 78 rpm <sup>†</sup>  |         |
| 10. Allegro con brio                                     | matrix 2EA 10377                                     | (4.25)  |
| MOZART <b>Piano Concerto No 21 in C major K467</b>       | HALLÉ ORCHESTRA/LESLIE HEWARD                        |         |
| 11. (Allegro maestoso)                                   | 2 & 4 March 1942; unpublished on 78 rpm <sup>†</sup> | (14.06) |
| 12. Andante  | matrixes 2ER 603/10                                  | (8.12)  |
| 13. Allegro vivace assai                                 | (Cadenzas: Denis Matthews)                           | (6.35)  |
| 14. BRAHMS <b>Capriccio in B minor Op 76 No 2</b>        | 29 April 1941; B 9189; matrix 0EA 9302-1             | (3.28)  |
| 15. BRAHMS <b>Intermezzo in A flat major Op 76 No 3</b>  | 29 April 1941; B 9189; matrix 0EA 9303-1             | (3.16)  |
| 16. BRAHMS <b>Intermezzo in E flat major Op 117 No 1</b> | 8 April 1941; C 3226; matrix 2EA 9211-2              | (4.56)  |
| 17. BRAHMS <b>Intermezzo in C major Op 119 No 3</b>      | 8 April 1941; C 3226; matrix 2EA 9219-2              | (1.42)  |
| 18. BRAHMS <b>Capriccio in D minor Op 116 No 7</b>       | ———— " ————  | (2.25)  |

<sup>†</sup> The sources for the Haydn sonata movement and the Mozart concerto were Bryan Crimp's transfers for the 1990 APR release, 'Myra Hess - A Vignette' (CDAPR 7012), with new application of pitch adjustments, declicking and re-equalisation. Two sides of the Haydn sonata were recorded at the same session as the Fergusson Bagatelles (CD4), but only one survived in EMI's vaults. In his notes for the earlier set, Crimp recounted that the Mozart concerto probably was not released at the time it was recorded because of severe pitch fluctuations on some of the sides, due to erratic wartime electricity levels in Manchester. The original matrices had been destroyed; but shellac test pressings of seven of the eight sides were discovered in the EMI Archives in the early 1970s. Since more than one take existed for several of the sides, editing between takes allowed for the worst pitch fluctuations to be avoided. Although the final side was missing, a tape transfer of it taken from a test pressing also turned up. The equalisation and filtering on the tape were markedly different from the more open sound afforded by the discs; but, as Crimp noted, 'better this than no conclusion at all!' M0T

③ The HMV 78-rpm recordings, 1937–1949 (continued)

(79.39)

- SCHUMANN **Carnaval** Op 9
1. Prélude 25 April & 3 May 1938; C 3008/10 (2.25)
  2. Pierrot matrices 2EA 6136-3, 6137-3, 6138-5, 6139-2, 6188-4 & 6189-3 (1.16)
  3. Arlequin (0.43)
  4. Valse noble (1.24)
  5. Eusebius (1.59)
  6. Florestan (1.00)
  7. Coquette (1.06)
  8. Réplique (0.29)
  9. Papillons (0.45)
  10. A.S.C.H. – S.C.H.A. (Lettres dansantes) (0.38)
  11. Chiarina (1.09)
  12. Chopin (1.39)
  13. Estrella (0.32)
  14. Reconnaissance (1.35)
  15. Pantalon et Colombine (0.55)
  16. Valse allemande (0.52)
  17. Paganini: Intermezzo (1.10)
  18. Aveu (1.04)
  19. Promenade (1.49)
  20. Pause (0.20)
  21. Marche des Davidsbündler contre les Philistins (3.55)
- SCHUMANN **Piano Concerto in A minor** Op 54 ORCHESTRA/WALTER GOEHR
22. Allegro affettuoso 5 October 1937; C 2942/5 (15.43)
  23. Intermezzo: Andantino grazioso – matrices 2EA 5376-1A, 5377-3, 5378-2, 5379-1, (5.04)
  24. Allegro vivace 5380-1A, 5381-2, 5382-1 & 5383-1 (11.01)
25. FRANCK **Variations symphoniques** CITY OF BIRMINGHAM ORCHESTRA/BASIL CAMERON 24 June 1941 (15.30)  
C 3237/8; matrices 2ER 522-1, 523-1, 524-1 & 525-1
26. MATTHAY **Album leaf** Op 22 8 June 1938; B 8758; matrix 0EA 6607-3 (3.27)
  27. MATTHAY **Elves** Op 17 25 April 1938; B 8758; matrix 0EA 6606-1 (2.08)

④ The HMV 78-rpm recordings, 1937–1949 (continued) (78.07)

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1. HOWARD FERGUSON **Five Bagatelles** Op 9 12 January 1945; C 3423; matrix 2EA 10375-3/6-1 (7.19)  
HOWARD FERGUSON **Piano Sonata in F minor** Op 8
2. Lento – Allegro inquieto 19 November 1942; C 3335/7 (8.21)
3. Poco adagio matrices 2EA 9292-1, 9293-2, 9294-2, 9295-1 & 9296-2 (6.38)
4. Allegro non troppo – Allegro molto ma non presto – Lento (6.49)

The HMV LPs 1952–1957

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- BEETHOVEN **Piano Sonata in E major** Op 109
5. Vivace, ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo 17–19 November 1953; ALP 1169 (4.07)
6. Prestissimo (2.28)
7. Tema (Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo) – Variations I-VI (14.58)
- BEETHOVEN **Piano Sonata in A flat major** Op 110
8. Moderato cantabile, molto espressivo 1–2 October 1953; ALP 1169 (6.33)
9. Allegro molto – Coda (Poco più mosso) (2.18)
10. Adagio, ma non troppo (3.43)
11. Fuga (Allegro, ma non troppo) (7.26)
12. BEETHOVEN **Klavierstück in A minor ‘Für Elise’** Wo059 12 October 1957; BLP 1103 (3.15)
13. BEETHOVEN **Bagatelle in E flat major** Op 126 No 3 ——— “ ——— (3.05)
14. MENDELSSOHN **Song without Words in A major** Op 102 No 5 ——— “ ——— (1.06)

⑤ The HMV LPs, 1952–1957 (continued)

(79.30)

SCHUMANN <b>Piano Concerto in A minor</b> Op 54 PHILHARMONIA ORCHESTRA/RUDOLF SCHWARZ		
1. Allegro affettuoso		22 December 1952; BLP 1039 (15.41)
2. Intermezzo: Andantino grazioso –		(5.30)
3. Allegro vivace		(11.30)
SCHUMANN <b>Études symphoniques</b> Op 13		
4. Thema: Andante		22–23 October 1953; BLP 1061 (1.27)
5. Variation 1: Un poco più vivo		(1.19)
6. Variation 2		(3.37)
7. Étude 3: Vivace		(1.24)
8. Variation 3		(0.58)
9. Variation 4		(1.18)
10. Variation 5		(1.08)
11. Variation 6: Allegro molto		(0.54)
12. Variation 7		(2.19)
13. Étude 9: Presto possibile		(0.45)
14. Variation 8		(1.26)
15. Variation 9		(3.37)
16. Finale: Allegro brillante		(6.41)
17. SCARLATTI <b>Sonata in C minor</b> L352 (Kk11)		12 October 1957; BLP 1103 (3.24)
18. SCARLATTI <b>Sonata in G major</b> L387 (Kk14)	———— " ———	(2.47)
19. GRANADOS <b>The Maiden and the Nightingale</b> from Goyescas	———— " ———	(6.38)
20. BRAHMS <b>Waltz in A flat</b> Op 39 No 15	———— " ———	(1.33)
21. BRAHMS <b>Intermezzo in C major</b> Op 119 No 3	———— " ———	(1.48)
22. BACH/HESS <b>Jesu, joy of man's desiring</b>	———— " ———	(3.42)





MYRA HESS practising  
in the (unheated) National Gallery during the War



ALTHOUGH HER NAME may not always evoke the same imagery as Paderewski or Rachmaninov, few pianists in the twentieth century have ever reached the iconic status of Dame Myra Hess. In 1935, the American magazine *Etude* ranked her among the twelve greatest pianists of all time, a list that included Anton Rubinstein, Godowsky and Horowitz.<sup>1</sup> In October 1946, when she returned to New York after the War, the audience was on its feet from the moment she emerged on stage, remaining till the last note 'to listen ... to applaud and to cheer'.<sup>2</sup> To be sure, she was a towering virtuoso, but few could match the spell that her subtle, probing musicality seemed to exert on her listeners – even in an age when extroverted flamboyance was far more the norm. She was the first Matthay pupil to forge a long-standing international career and, for a generation, her artistry was viewed, perhaps inaccurately, as synonymous with his teaching, since her focus on the German masters was by no means typical of all his students. But few major pianists have ever been so closely identified with a teacher, and theirs was a lifelong relationship, for Matthay supplied a parental-like benevolence that she seldom found – even with her own father.<sup>3</sup>

The youngest of four children, Julia Myra Hess was born into an Orthodox Jewish family on 25 February 1890, at the Alexandra Road home of her parents, who had always lived in and around Hampstead. Modestly affluent, Frederick Hess, a partner in his father's textile firm, was able to provide a comfortable living for his family, and he soon relocated them to a far larger home on Boundary Road. However, Myra saw little of him in her formative years, since he left the house early each morning to journey to his East End

Yours sincerely  
Myra Hess

plant, and usually returned long after the children were asleep. She was far closer to her mother, Lizzie, who placed her with a neighbourhood piano teacher when she was five, and two years later allowed her to take a musical exam at Trinity College. At the age of seven, Myra emerged as the youngest child ever to receive the Trinity College Certificate, and she was soon studying under various teachers at the Guildhall School.

When she was eleven, she entered St Leonard's School for Girls, an institution recommended to her mother by her close friend Ida Scharrer – no doubt, because it was the school attended by her youngest daughter, Irene. Although Irene was two years older than Myra, the two soon became inseparable, and since she, her mother and her aunt were already studying with Matthay, it seemed inevitable that Myra should try for one of the newly created Ada Lewis Scholarships at the Royal Academy of Music. In the autumn of 1903, at the age of thirteen, she won the coveted honour that waived her fees for three years and guaranteed her two lessons per week with Irene's beloved 'Uncle Tobs'.

At the time, Tobias Matthay was already establishing an international reputation, since his first book, *The Act of Touch*, appeared a few months after Myra entered the Academy.<sup>4</sup> In addition, many of his students, such as Gertrude Peppercorn and York Bowen, had made impressive London debuts while still RAM students, and Myra and Irene, who were both recipients of numerous Academy prizes during their student days, soon followed in their footsteps. Irene made her debut in Bechstein Hall at the age of sixteen, and Myra followed suit in January of 1908 – in a demanding programme at Aeolian

Hall – about a month before her eighteenth birthday. By then, she had already performed solo with the 29-year-old Thomas Beecham, but though all of her recent performances had been well received, financial stability eluded her for over a decade. Within two years, her father – suffering from a variety of ailments that may have affected his judgement – had declared bankruptcy, largely because of his lavish investments in ill-fated West End theatrical productions. Incredibly, he constantly badgered Myra to leave the concert stage for more lucrative engagements in music halls, while she stubbornly fought to maintain a sense of dignity under his roof. Matters finally came to a head in June of 1914, when Frederick Hess and Myra's two older brothers suddenly barged into a rehearsal in her attic studio and physically forced violinist Winifred Smith down the stairs and out into the street. Myra was so horrified that she was soon using Matthay's School on Wimpole Street as her mailing address. He sent her as many students as he could, and every weekend he and his wife, Jessie, welcomed her to their Sussex country home, High Marley, as though she were their only daughter.<sup>5</sup>

Myra benefitted from Matthay's largesse in countless professional ways as well. After World War I, no other teacher in London garnered as much influence, and when she returned from her first American tour in the summer of 1922 – as part of the RAM Centennial celebrations – she was chosen to perform his Concert-Piece in A minor, Op 23, for the King and Queen. Her career on two continents was now firmly established, but oddly, she made no recordings until late 1927 – over 18 years after Irene had cut her first discs for The Gramophone Company.<sup>6</sup> Myra's

lifelong aversion to the recording studio has been well documented, for even though she also struggled with stage fright, she often needed an audience to energize her.<sup>7</sup> Although it would be difficult to locate a 'bad' recording in her catalogue, many have observed that she often became more introspective and reserved in front of a microphone, at times rendering well-crafted, but tamer, testaments to her art that only imperfectly reflect the excitement of her live performances. That this tendency was not always evident is shown by the present collection – the first complete issuing of her studio solo and concerto releases – which demonstrates that her entire output merits careful study, for indeed recorded masterpieces abound.

The full back-story leading to her recording debut may never be known, but on 18 December 1927, Myra joined her lifelong friend Hungarian violinist Jelly d'Arányi for a duo-recital in New York's Town Hall. Though their programme included no Schubert, in the same month they met British cellist Felix Salmond at Columbia's Manhattan studios to record Schubert's Trio in B flat, D898, and several weeks later Myra returned to make her first solo recordings for the same label, remaining with Columbia until 1933. Not surprisingly, her first selection was her already well-known arrangement of the chorale from Cantata 147, *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben*, which Oxford published in 1926 as 'Jesu, joy of man's desiring'. Myra began extemporizing on the chorale in April of 1920 after hearing a performance of the Cantata, and she first played it for New York audiences in April 1925. Her earliest recording, from 17 January 1928 (Disc 1), was followed by two others, an

HMV offering on 9 January 1940 (Disc 2) and, fittingly, the last recording she made, an LP version for HMV on 12 October 1957 (Disc 5). Arguably, all are minor masterpieces, and each exquisitely captures the intricate tapestry of her multi-voiced texture. Though the first version is slightly faster than the other two, all exemplify Matthay's ideal of tonal colouring, with a dynamic control so developed that she never needs to force her tenor to separate it from the higher voices.

The same clarity of line is shown by her Gigue from the fifth French Suite, complete with repeats, which served as a fitting B-side to her first 'Jesu' offering. She returned two days later to record Ravel's *Pavane*, which she performed about six weeks later in Town Hall – along with the complete Bach Suite – on 6 March 1928. The luminous clarity and kaleidoscopic colours she projects have made many regret that this is the only Ravel she recorded, especially since her March programme also included the composer's *Ondine* and *Alborada del gracioso* – iconic, virtuosic challenges which, sadly, were never captured on disc. Columbia had designed the release of the Schubert Trio to coincide with the 1928 centennial commemoration of the composer's death, and Myra returned to their studios on 16 February to set down her only recording of a Schubert Sonata, the 'little' A major, D664. Again, it is regrettable that she never recorded another,<sup>8</sup> for if the first and second movements are a bit tame, she catches fire in the dance-like finale, with passagework made all the more scintillating by her masterful control of dynamic gradations.

During the same two-day session, she left four shorter works that were later dropped from

her repertoire, and today's listeners may be especially grateful that these have again been made accessible. Her Schubert commemoration continued with a curiosity by today's standards: Rudolph Ganz's transcription of the once popular ballet interlude that Schubert contributed to the 1823 play *Rosamunde*. Her captivating performance presages the (quite unprecedented) success she later enjoyed with many of Schubert's *German Dances*, which, sadly, were never issued as commercial recordings.' At the same session, she created her only Debussy releases, 'Poissons d'or' from the second set of *Images*, and two well-known Preludes from the composer's first book. Her *Poissons d'or* is a marvel, not just for tonal variety, but for the sense of line and shape that Matthey insisted on with all performances. Her 'Maiden' floats as though it were a reverie in suspended animation, while her 'Minstrels' explodes with a rhythmic energy and satire that totally contravenes the matronly image with which she is so often caricatured.

Four additional miniatures – which she retained as repertoire staples – were laid down a month later, including two Scarlatti Sonatas, and a late work each from Beethoven and Brahms: the final Bagatelle from Op 119, and the buoyant C major Intermezzo from the identical opus number in Brahms's catalogue. She re-recorded the Brahms twice, first for a 1941 release by HMV (Disc 2), and again in her final 1957 session (Disc 5), where she also revisited the C minor Scarlatti from 1928, and the sparkling G major Sonata that she had first recorded in 1940. Matthey was especially fond of the C major Brahms, which he often used as a study for the thumb and forefinger, alternating the alto melody between the





MYRA HESS, CIRCA 1954

two. There are miraculous moments in each of Myra's accounts, but the greatly accelerated coda in her first version is especially interesting. The most noticeable difference in the two C minor Scarlatti renderings is her ornamentation, for by the late 1940s – heeding the advice of her friends Arthur Mendel and Howard Ferguson – she was often beginning her pre-Classical embellishments on the upper accessory. Both of her G major Sonatas are captivating, but interestingly enough, the LP version is a bit faster.

Myra next entered Columbia's studios on 23 April 1929 to begin a week of sessions devoted to shorter works, including a few curiosities that soon vanished from her programmes, such as Griffes's 'The white peacock' (which she learned exclusively for American audiences) and Falla's popular 'Ritual fire dance'. She imparts freshness and originality to both, qualities that are also apparent in Palmgren's charming 'Cradle song', which Columbia held back for two years before joining it to her plaintive 1931 recording of Schumann's 'Prophet Bird'. The additional works from the spring of 1929 remained in her repertoire for the rest of her career. At her first session on 23 April, she created another Bach disc, pairing the opening of the G major Toccata with the C sharp major Prelude and Fugue from book one of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. In New York and elsewhere, Myra was then performing the somewhat astounding feat of accepting encore 'requests' from her audiences – many of whom demanded Bach Preludes and Fugues – and the quality of her only surviving example is so pronounced that one can only wish she had recorded more of the '48'.

On 3 May at the same session where she created the Griffes and the Falla, she also set

down two exquisite *Lieder ohne Worte* of Mendelssohn: the 'Duetto' from Op 38, and the popular 'Spinning Song'. Her four remaining selections for Columbia (Disc 2) were recorded in London in a single session on 17 October 1933, when she presented two additional novelties released on a single disc. Although MacDowell was widely known in England, it seems likely that she learnt 'AD MDCXX' (1620 – the year the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock), from the composer's *Sea Pieces*, primarily for the benefit of American audiences. Its darker moods serve as a fitting contrast to the jauntiness of the C major *Slavonic Dance* – Myra's only four-hand recording – for which she was joined by Sir Hamilton Harty, then widely regarded as one of the finest collaborative artists in Britain. In the same session, she gave renditions of two popular nocturnes, one by Field and another by Chopin, and both are masterful gems.

Although the underlying facts were carefully concealed from the public, in the spring of 1934 her career faced a serious setback when she was hospitalized in Boston with fibrocystic breast disease, soon acquiescing to her doctor's recommendation to have both of her breasts removed.<sup>10</sup> Understandably, she was forced to cancel numerous engagements, and she made no recordings again till October 1935, when she joined d'Arányi and Spanish cellist Gaspar Cassadó to record the Brahms Trio in C, Op 87, for HMV – the only surviving record of the 'New Trio Ensemble', a name under which they frequently performed. She remained with HMV for the rest of her career, but she made no further recordings until 1937 when she partnered with Feurmann to record the Beethoven Cello Sonata in A, Op 69, before joining Walter Goehr to set

down the entire Schumann Concerto (Disc 3) in an extended session on 5 October. Some 15 years later in December 1952, she re-recorded the Schumann (Disc 5) with Rudolf Schwarz and the Philharmonia as an HMV LP, and comparisons between the two versions are inevitable. Other than the enhanced sound quality of LP technology, the most obvious difference is shown by the contrast between the two orchestras, since Goehr's chamber-like studio ensemble is no match for the Philharmonia's richer textures. Nevertheless, if the second version is more majestic, many listeners may actually prefer the more rhapsodic earlier rendition (despite some smudged notes in the first movement), since Myra's every nuance seems to speak with a sense of unrestrained passion.

Only one additional studio concerto recording was released in her lifetime: the Franck *Symphonic Variations* (a staple of Matthey pupils), which she reluctantly recorded in June of 1941 with the City of Birmingham Orchestra under Basil Cameron (Disc 3) since her dear friend Leslie Heward, the Orchestra's conductor, was ill. Nonetheless, Cameron assisted her ably, and the Franck must rank as one of her finest recordings. The following March she was reunited with Heward when she journeyed to Manchester to record Mozart's C major concerto K467 with the Hallé Orchestra (Disc 2), but the recording was never released due to Wartime exigencies – most notably, intermittent power disruptions that caused HMV's equipment to register unacceptable pitch fluctuations. The company even destroyed the masters, and though a reconstruction from surviving test copies was released in 1990,<sup>11</sup> the version included here, with digitally enhanced pitch

adjustments, is the finest restoration to date. Despite some residual acoustical imperfections, the recording ranks as such an extraordinary testament to Myra's interpretative powers that one wishes she had recorded far more of the composer's concerti – all of which she eventually performed at the National Gallery. Two brief but imaginative cadenzas by Denis Matthews – who as an Academy pupil of Harold Craxton was directly in the Matthay lineage – provide added interest.<sup>12</sup>

In the spring of 1938, Myra recorded the entire Schumann *Carnaval* (Disc 3), a long-time staple of her repertoire, which HMV released on four 12" discs – complete with performance instructions for students – at the price of 16 shillings. The company was thus continuing a series of 'cheap classics' they had begun a year earlier with her Schumann Concerto, efforts that were highly praised by *Gramophone*. Despite a few occasional blemishes, her *Carnaval* is an epic performance, at once highly original, seemingly spontaneous, and often overpowering in its grandeur as it harkens back to the 'Golden Age' of pianism. A month later, in honour of Matthay's eightieth birthday, she set down two highly contrasting miniatures he had composed years earlier, and 'Album leaf' must rank as one of her finest recorded interpretations, exquisitely capturing the rubatos and colourings that her master imparted to his own playing. Though Myra had once included many British works on her programmes, these became far less prominent as her fame grew, but she made an exception during the War when she recorded two new works by her close friend Howard Ferguson, whose dark, often brooding, three-movement Sonata she premiered at the National Gallery

on 23 April 1940. Her mastery of Ferguson's demanding idioms, as well as of the often raucous *Bagatelles* that she recorded in January 1945, makes both accounts definitive and demonstrates without question that she focused on the Masters by choice and not because she was limited in her grasp of more modern styles. To be sure, her wartime recordings also included a Brahms set (Disc 2) – from which the Op 76 A flat Intermezzo is especially memorable – an impeccable account of some Purcell dances, and the first movement to Haydn's popular D major Sonata, which she offered in 1945 at the same session as Ferguson's *Bagatelles*. It is unknown why HMV did not follow through with the other movements, but the Haydn was never released, despite an extraordinary performance from (the now) Dame Myra. She made her final 78-rpm recording, devoted entirely to Bach, on 17 November 1949. It paired her own sensitive transcription of the composer's Adagio from the C major Organ Toccata, BWV564, with the charming 'little' D major Prelude, BWV936.<sup>13</sup>

In the final decade of her career, Dame Myra returned to the repertoire she most loved, willingly committing substantial as well as smaller works to the newer LP technology. She was now frequently performing the last three Beethoven Sonatas as a recital programme, and although it is regrettable that she never recorded Op 111, today's listeners can be grateful that HMV captured the E major and the A flat in October and November of 1953 (Disc 4). Over the years, both recordings have been much heralded and both are so transcendental, showing the artist at the height of her powers, that it would serve little purpose to gild the lily with extensive verbal descriptions. Fortunately, the demise of



the 78 era prompted HMV and other companies to commit more willingly to longer works, and barely three weeks after Myra had completed the Op 110 Beethoven, she recorded Schumann's *Symphonic Études*, Op 13 (Disc 5), a great favourite of Matthey, who delighted in noting that it had been dedicated to his first composition teacher, William Sterndale Bennett. But despite the fact that her rendering is replete with miraculous moments – Variation 9 and the Finale which follows it are especially stunning – many have observed that this recording does not always do justice to the fire and passion that Myra brought to her live performances. Matthey's protégé, Denise Lassimonne (1903–94), who enjoyed a sister-like camaraderie with Myra for over 40 years, even observed that many passages sounded stilted by comparison to what one might have experienced in a concert setting.<sup>14</sup> And for whatever reason, despite the acknowledged success of her Beethoven recordings in the autumn of 1953, nearly four years passed before she again entered the HMV studios.

Then at her last recording session, on 12 October 1957, despite a pattern of failing health, she produced nine remarkable miniatures on the same day. Some of these were being committed to disc for the first time, such as her compelling reading of *Für Elise*, a fitting contrast to her moving treatment of Beethoven's E flat Bagatelle from Op 126. And few of her recordings can surpass the exquisite beauty of her sparkling A major *Lied* from Mendelssohn's Op 102 (all on Disc 4), where the extraordinary range of her colouring palette has been beautifully captured. She also imparts a subtle beauty to the often hackneyed Brahms Waltz in A flat. But arguably,



MYRA HESS with HOWARD FERGUSON  
and JOYCE GRENFELL in the National Gallery



MYRA HESS IN 1957

the jewel in the crown from this set – and one of the greatest recordings of her career – is her haunting, ethereal reading of Granados’s ‘Maiden and the Nightingale’, where her polish and control virtually transform the piano’s expressive possibilities. As Denise Lassimonne remarked over twenty years after her death, ‘When you hear Myra’s nightingale sing on this recording, you begin to get a sense of what she could actually do’.<sup>15</sup> Fortunately, today’s listeners are able to confirm that what she could ‘actually’ do was remarkable.

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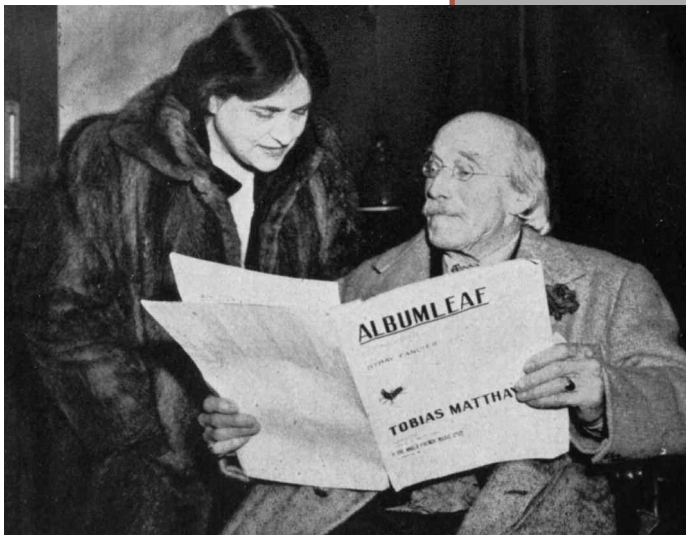
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Mozart Concerto and Haydn Sonata

- <sup>1</sup> See Walter Spry, 'Lessons from Hearing the Great Pianists', *The Etude* (June 1935): 378.
- <sup>2</sup> See Olin Downes, 'Overflow Through Cheers Myra Hess', *New York Times*, 13 Oct. 1946, 52.
- <sup>3</sup> See my *England's Piano Sage: The Life and Teachings of Tobias Matthay* (Lanham, MD: 2012) for a more complete discussion of Matthay's relationship with Myra.
- <sup>4</sup> See *Tobias Matthay, The Act of Touch in all its Diversity* (London: 1903).
- <sup>5</sup> See Marian C. McKenna, *Myra Hess: A Portrait* (London: 1976), 52–60.
- <sup>6</sup> See *Irene Scharrer: The complete electric and selected acoustic recordings* (APR 6010).
- <sup>7</sup> See for example, Arthur Mendel's essay, 'Myra and her Audience', in *Myra Hess by her Friends* (New York: 1966), 38–43.
- <sup>8</sup> Fortunately, a remarkable live performance of the Schubert B flat Sonata, D960, has been captured on *Dame Myra Hess: Live recordings from the University of Illinois, 1949, vol. 1* (APR 5520).
- <sup>9</sup> Several dances were captured from her 1949 live performances at the University of Illinois (APR 5520).
- <sup>10</sup> Tragically, the operations may have been unnecessary. See McKenna, 101–102, and Siek, 300–301.
- <sup>11</sup> See *Myra Hess—A Vignette* (APR 7012).
- <sup>12</sup> Fortunately, a number of Myra's live concerto performances were broadcast and preserved as transcriptions, and have been made available on CD in recent years. A live performance of the Mozart Concerto, K271, with Casals was also released as an LP in 1952.
- <sup>13</sup> Oxford published Myra's Bach Adagio transcription in 1937.
- <sup>14</sup> Author's interview with Lassimonne at her home in Hampshire, England, Aug. 1988. See *England's Piano Sage* for a fuller discussion of the relationship between Myra and Denise.
- <sup>15</sup> Lassimonne interview.



MYRA HESS and TOBIAS MATTHAY

*The Times*, 20 February 1943

ADD

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# MYRA HESS

## *The complete solo and concerto studio recordings*

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- The HMV LPs 1952-1957
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TOBIAS MATTHAY (1858-1945) is the greatest piano teacher Britain has produced. From the 1890s to the 1930s, first at the RAM and then also at his own school, he almost single-handedly produced a generation of concert pianists who launched an English piano tradition. York Bowen was an early pupil, but those best remembered are a group of female pianists; Harriet Cohen, Myra Hess, Irene Scharrer and Moura Lympany, all of whom will feature in this APR series.



MYRA HESS, undoubtedly the most important Matthay pupil, and the one most closely associated with him, became a household name on both sides of the Atlantic. In her youth, she played a wide repertoire including much contemporary music, but in her latter years she became best known for her playing of the great classics of the Germanic repertoire and particularly Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart and Schumann.

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