

# ■ Book Reviews

## *Lyrebird Rising: Louise Hanson-Dyer of L'Oiseau-Lyre 1884-1962*

Jim Davidson

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The publishing house of Editions de L'Oiseau-Lyre was born under the gaze of a photo of Gustav Holst in an office located just off the Faubourg Saint-Germain in Paris in 1931. Louise Berta Mosson Dyer, expatriate Australian, awoke to find herself a publisher of the complete works of François Couperin in 12 volumes. Jim Davidson's record of the publishing house, *Lyrebird Rising*, traces the destiny of Louise from her Francophile childhood in Melbourne to her achievements in the world of publishing and recording and the award of Officier de la Légion d'Honneur.

Louise's father, L.L. (Louis Lawrence) Smith, was a doctor and politician who made a fortune dispensing pills for 'Lowness of Spirits' and 'Bilious Complaints'. Taking his name, with the minor addition of an 'e', Louise had a privileged education and became an accomplished pianist. Soon after her father died in 1910 she married Jimmy Dyer, 'the linoleum king', apparently to settle into a life of wealthy indolence: she and Jimmy travelled, became patrons and officers of various local societies and held popular soirées in their mansion. In the next step in her destiny, for the tercentenary of the birth of Molière in 1923, Louise organised a celebration in the Masonic Hall in Melbourne, complete with orange trees, girls in seventeenth-century costume and a carpet of grass clippings. She went on to organise an Australian Composers' Night, a soirée at which Beatrice Ternan wore a purple turban and read from the *Rubaiyat*, and the first Australian performance of Holst's opera, *Savitri*, attended by 800 people.

In 1927, perhaps finding Melbourne too small a pond for the exercise of her talents, Louise and Jimmy went to Europe, where they travelled some more, attended International Society for Contemporary Music festivals, struck up a friendship with Holst and members of the English folk song coterie and discovered spinets, violas da gamba and Northumbrian pipes. By 1929 they had decided to live in Paris where Louise met Henry Prunières, the editor of *La Revue Musicale*. His enthusiasm for the music of Lully, combined with her entrepreneurial skills, ultimately led to the estab-

lishment of L'Oiseau-Lyre. But Louise was not interested in running a paying business: the aim of the press was to produce accurate and scholarly editions of neglected scores for the purpose of performance. In the 1930s L'Oiseau-Lyre's publications included editions of Couperin, Blow, Elisabeth Jacquet de La Guerre and polyphonies of the thirteenth century, in tandem with musicologists such as Paul Brunoldo, Yvonne Rokseth and Maurice Cauchie. Meanwhile, visitors to afternoon tea in Louise's apartment included the composers Darius Milhaud and Arthur Honegger, the poet Paul Valéry and novelist James Joyce. By the time war arrived, and Louise was forced to leave Paris, she had published over a hundred recordings, amassed a library of treatises and editions of baroque music, and been awarded the Légion d'Honneur.

Jimmy Dyer died in 1938. Having first married a man who was 25 years older, wealthy and cultivated, Louise then chose the penniless son of a rag merchant who had latterly been a teacher at Northcote High School and who was her junior by 24 years. But Jeff Hanson had several winning attributes: he spoke impeccable French, he was intelligent and far more educated than Louise, meticulous in business and above all tactful. They adjusted their ages on the marriage certificate, wed in an obscure English village and honeymooned on another continent, just in case their contravention of social mores provoked comment. It did not, and the relationship proved to be the defining one of her life. During the war they were exiled in Oxford where Louise was bored and Jeff completed a doctorate. They returned to Paris in 1945 where although the press faced acute shortages of paper their output of recordings could not keep up with demand. Louise resumed her network, recruiting the musicologists Roger Désormière, Guillaume de Van and Thurston Dart, performers such as Isabelle Nef, Peter Pears and Neville Marriner. Oiseau-Lyre produced the first long-playing record in France and in the 1950s opened an office in the tax-free haven of Monaco. Louise and Jeff continued a peripatetic existence, flitting between

Monaco, London and Paris. They personally checked each volume for blemishes, despatched and sometimes delivered them, organised halls, performers and recording technicians and timed the sessions with a stop watch (but a girl came to type the accounts). The editions department now took second place to recordings which were distributed on three continents by Decca. The works recorded became more and more ambitious, later including Berlioz's *L'Enfance du Christ* and Bach's Christmas Oratorio, enhanced by the latest ideas of authenticity and the best performers that Louise could command. After Louise's death in 1962, and Jeff's in 1971, the recording side of the business was sold to Decca. The press presently continues in Monaco directed by Jeff's widow, Margarita M. Hanson.

The themes of this account are professional, rather than biographical. Louise was both philanthropist and businesswoman, who could alternately sponsor lavish entertainments and pinch pennies in order to produce another precious edition of forgotten masters. She surrounded herself with creative and intelligent men, such as Holst and Dart, but ignored their advice when it did not concur with her instinct. Possessing a vast knowledge and appreciation of music written before 1800, she alone made the decisions as to what to publish. The reasons for these were however sometimes sentimental, as for the publications of the young Australian composers Peggy Glanville-Hicks and Margaret Sutherland. Her unerring demand for the best of everything ensured the reputation of the press and the many accolades it received.

Here we have a woman who was a great man, one who embarked on the lifelong quest to fulfil her destiny without qualm or setback. For in this account there are no failures, no sufferings, and little emotion. The deaths of her father in 1910, and her favourite brother in the Great War in 1915 seemed to elicit no feeling. When she was 30, an event took place which may well have altered the course of her life:

Early in 1914 Louise was overtaken by tragedy: shortly after she knew she was to have a child she fell ill, and the doctor advised that she should terminate the pregnancy. Louise thought she would be able to carry the child, but presumably she was persuaded otherwise, for she underwent a hysterectomy.

No woman could read these sentences without a spasm of sympathy. What were her feelings? Venturing an opinion, her biographer states that 'She felt cut

off from the future, trapped in a violated body'. This is all the information we receive, and the reader searches in vain for evidence of the emotional recuperation. Her husband responded by indulging her. He gave her a cheque book and took her on a cruise. Jimmy, in fact, faded into the distance, not mentioned at all between pages 59 and 90 when Louise was wowing Melbourne with her enthusiasms, nor from page 199 to 252 when she was setting up the press in Paris. In life he was the perfectly indulgent husband; nor did his death in the morning prevent her from entertaining her guests at lunch.

Family ties were secondary to those of the firm. Despite assertions of Louise's strong family attachments this is contradicted by the evidence. Her mother is last mentioned when Louise is eight and, widowed in her 50s, we hear nothing further of her life or death. Louise's brother Gengoult rates a mention as Lord Mayor but Louise seems to have been friendly with only one sister-in-law out of a host of siblings and their offspring. Nor is it clear whether female friendships were of any use to Louise, who maintained a correspondence with a female friend in Melbourne but generally preferred the company of men.

It is probably no coincidence that the press was established in Paris, the city which fostered women of achievement. In the late 1920s its citizens included Sylvia Beach of Shakespeare & Co., Nadia Boulanger and the Princesse de Polignac, all women whose careers were focussed on the enhancement of the careers of creative men. Beach published Joyce's *Ulysses*, Boulanger trained generations of French and American composers, and Polignac bankrolled Diaghilev's Ballet russes. Although Louise knew many of the French composers of the day, their story only intersects with hers when they meet at her home or office. Not being a creator herself, she appeared not to participate in the life of Paris's creative community, the café life of the expatriate Americans or the salons of Polignac.

Yet Louise managed to avoid the fate of another Lady Bountiful, Ottoline Morrell, who inspired sneers rather than gratitude from the artists she befriended. Louise was no doubt misunderstood and the reader is given scattered hints of her ridiculous taste in hats, her *faux pas* in kissing the President of the Republic, and her magisterial demeanour. We learn that in full flight she could be 'a fair specimen of a gushing female' but this is so peripheral a detail to the essentially masculine story that it is easily ignored. (In fact, such jibes are

relegated to the captions of the photographs.) Towards the end of the story the author admits that 'the abiding impression remained one of eccentricity' when for the previous 459 pages he had carefully avoided such a denotation. Louise may have been an exceptional woman, one who rewrote the possible life story of a woman, but she was also one who was seen to have deviated from the acceptable norms of marriage, motherhood and family life.

The absence of the sense of the life of a woman is partly explained by the vagaries of sources available. It seems that Louise was neither a personal letter-writer nor a diary-keeper, a serious handicap for her biographer. While Jeff kept his letters to Louise at the time of their marriage, hers no longer exist. Did she destroy them, as she did her letters to Prunières? With the exception of her letters to Sybil Hewett in Melbourne, there is almost no material from which the biographer can extract the voice of Louise herself. It is surprising then that little use was made of the 125 articles Louise submitted to the Melbourne *Herald* and *Table Talk* from 1927-38. The author is forced to resort (as does the reviewer of his book) to frequent use of 'seemed' and 'appeared' and to resist the temptations of speculation. Louise is therefore revealed as others saw her rather than as she saw herself.

These disappointments are compensated for by the impressive breadth of the author's investigations.

The archives of the press have obviously been carefully recorded and preserved and Davidson has cast his net far and wide for any information which is remotely applicable. Thus he has glanced through the Sylvia Beach papers at Princeton, quoted from the diary of the folklorist William Gillies Whittaker on the occasion of his visit to Melbourne, and waded through the archives of the British Music Society in Melbourne. Two of his most significant finds were newspaper articles Louise had cut out and secreted in books in her library. The list of those friends and colleagues interviewed is spectacular, extending to more than 100 names from Melbourne to Monaco.

The book's faults are meagre: the cricket analogies (how will Americans understand them?), the awful captions, and its weight. These factors notwithstanding, the value of this study is not simply in its exposition of the history of Oiseau-Lyre and its place in the history of musicology, recording and publishing. Its record of Louise's activities in Melbourne in the British Music Society, the Alliance Française and her private soirées is an invaluable piece in the puzzle of the history of music in Melbourne. The Appendix listing the publications and recordings of the press is also a useful musicological resource. At 578 weighty pages, *Lyrebird Rising* is a *tour de force*.

Suzanne Robinson

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