

THE EARLY YEARS

John McCormack was born in the Bawn, Athlone, Co. Westmeath, on June 14, 1884. He was the fourth of eleven children, five of whom survived into adulthood. His parents, Andrew and Hannah McCormack, were mill workers who had come from Scotland, where the tenor's Sligo-born paternal grandfather, Peter McCormack, had settled.

John was a good student, winning a scholarship from the Marist Brothers in Athlone to Summerhill College, Co. Sligo. There he excelled in languages and mathematics, as well as revealing a promising singing voice. On leaving school at eighteen, early thoughts about entering the priesthood were replaced by a desire to pursue a singing career and he gained a place in the Palestrina Choir at the Pro-Cathedral in Dublin under its director, Vincent O'Brien.

O'Brien, who also taught Margaret Burke-Sheridan and James Joyce, among others, entered McCormack for the *Feis Ceoil* of 1903. Although the youngest competitor, at nineteen, he won the gold medal in the tenor section.

In 1904 McCormack sang briefly at the St Louis World Fair, where he became engaged to Dublin soprano Lily Foley, who had won a gold medal in the Gaelic section in the Feis of 1902. In the autumn of 1904, at the age of twenty, he made his recording debut in London, recording on both wax cylinder and shellac disc. While in London he heard the great Enrico Caruso (1873-1921) at Covent Garden, an experience he never forgot.

McCormack had made up his mind that he wanted to sing in opera and was intent on raising funds to study with Maestro Sabbatini in Milan.

1. POSTCARD OF ENRICO CARUSO.
2. SABBATINI.
3. JOHN AT SCHOOL IN ATHLONE.



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OPERA AT COVENT GARDEN

Remarkably, John McCormack had less than one year of formal training in Italy. After just a few months with Sabbatini he made his operatic debut in the title role of Mascagni's *L'Amico Fritz* at the Teatro Chiabrero, Savona, on January 13, 1906. Some further engagements followed in minor opera houses, and he then found himself out of work. He decided to return to London.

In what was a fairy-tale story of success, McCormack had only a few months of financial hardship before he established himself in the London concert halls. At the Boosey Ballad Concerts – prestigious events at which contemporary celebrities often appeared – the Irish tenor was heard and admired by Sir John Murray Scott, a man of considerable influence. Sir John pressed the young tenor's case with Harry Higgins, manager at Covent Garden. Higgins auditioned McCormack, liked the quality of his voice but thought it was too small for so large an auditorium. 'Then make your orchestra play more softly' Sir John Murray Scott is said to have retorted.

In October 1907, in the role of Turridu in Mascagni's *Cavalleria Rusticana* McCormack made his debut at the Royal Opera, Covent Garden. At twenty-three he was the youngest tenor ever to sing a lead role at the famous opera house. Soon he was partnering the greatest sopranos of the time, the coloratura Luisa Tetrazzini and the Australian prima donna, Nellie Melba.

He continued to sing at the Royal Opera as a *primo tenore* for eight consecutive years, until 1914 when it temporarily closed down due to the First World War. He had held his own against some of the greatest tenors of an era sometimes described as a golden age of opera.

He also kept up a concert schedule, touring on one occasion with the violinist Fritz Kreisler who became a lifelong friend and with whom he made many superb recordings.

1. FRITZ KREISLER.
2. NELLIE MELBA.
3. OPERA HOUSE AT COVENT GARDEN.



TO AMERICA

In 1909 McCormack crossed the Atlantic again to sing with Luisa Tetrazzini at Oscar Hammerstein's Manhattan Opera House, which the impresario was pitting against the might of the Metropolitan Opera. The tenor had 'flu on opening night but the New York audience immediately took him to its heart and McCormack took New York to his.

The following year when the Manhattan was bought out by the Metropolitan Opera, McCormack found himself singing in the largest opera house in the world opposite the great Dame Nellie Melba. He continued to sing at the Met, sporadically, until 1918.

His repertoire embraced the so-called bel canto operas of Rossini, Donizetti and Bellini and later composers such as Verdi and Puccini. Perhaps his greatest triumph, however, was with the role of Don Ottavio in Mozart's *Don Giovanni*. When he sang the role in Boston during the 1911-12 season and finished the aria 'Il mio tesoro', the conductor Felix Weingartner laid down his baton and led the applause. McCormack himself said if he was to be remembered by only one disc, 'Il mio tesoro', recorded in 1916, should be the one.

In 1911 Melba chose him as her leading tenor to make an opera tour of Australia. The 'consonance of the two beautiful voices', as the *Melbourne Herald* put it, brought rave reviews and packed houses, though ticket prices were three times what Australians were accustomed to paying.

His last opera season was at Monte Carlo in 1923 when he created the role of Gritzko in Mussorsky's opera *La Foire de Sorochintzi*. 'He sang divinely with a sigh of exquisite melancholy, tinged with tenderness...' wrote the critic Andr  Corneau in *Journal de Monaco*.

1. OSCAR HAMMERSTEIN.
2. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE.

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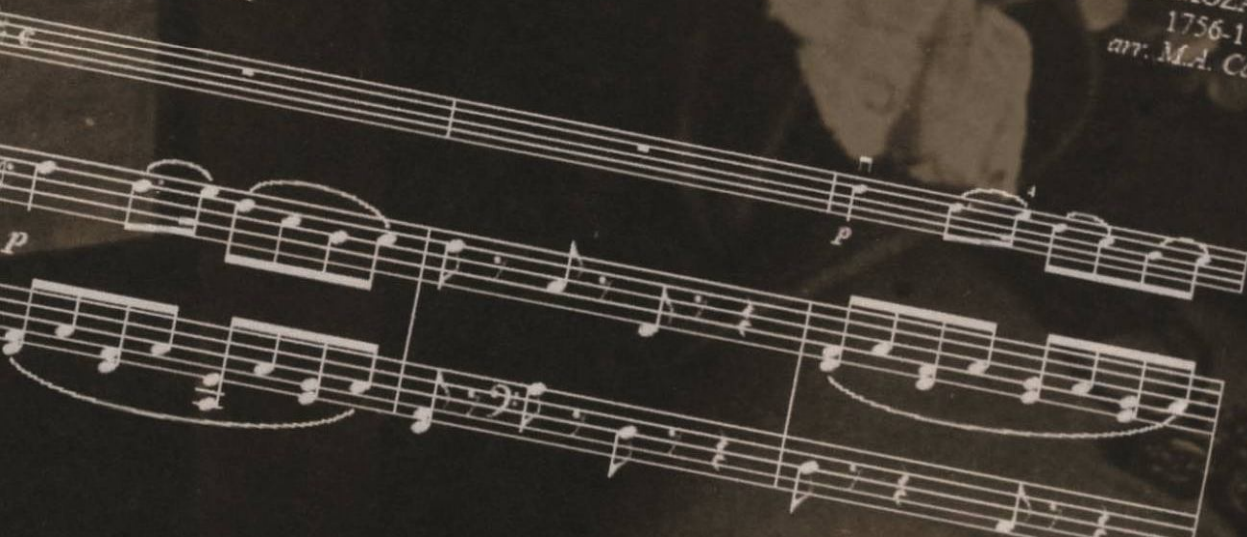
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Il mio tesoro intanto
Aria

Andante grazioso

Wolfgang Amadeus MOZART
1756-1791
arr. M.A. Caux



THE RECITALIST

*M*cCormack's natural habitat, as a consummate musician rather than an actor, was the concert platform rather than the opera house. His exquisite diction and the intimacy of his communication no matter how large the auditorium made his concert performances compelling experiences. He made his first concert tour in America with impresario Charles L. Wagner in 1912. Within a few years McCormack could fill virtually any concert hall, north or south, to capacity and indeed over capacity. Seats on stage behind the singer as well as standing room at the back of the auditorium became the norm. He would sing ten or twelve times in a single season in New York, in Boston four times in a week. He had become an entertainment phenomenon.

In 1923 he made a triumphant concert tour of middle Europe. Later he appeared as far away as Japan and South Africa. He was fêted wherever he went. An exceptionally good-looking man in his youth, he was particularly popular with female audiences.

His repertoire of concert music ranged from seventeenth and eighteenth century arias with which he would generally open his programmes, to German, English and American songs. Songs by Rachmaninov, whom he knew personally, would also often feature on the programme, particularly 'To the children'. McCormack would then round off the evening with Irish songs and ballads, for which he was revered.

As a recitalist he became the icon of an age in which the terms 'popular' and 'serious' singer were equally applicable. His enormous popularity was reflected in his huge record sales and he made over 800 discs. Critic Max de Schauensee commented that to have a McCormack Red Seal record was as common in the average American home in the twenties as 'father's slippers by the fire.'

KONZERT-DIREKTION HERMANN WOLFF, BERLIN W9, LINKSTR. 42
PHILHARMONIE
Mittwoch den 2. Mai 1923 - Abends 8 Uhr
Lieder-Abend
John McCormack
Am Flügel: Edwin Schneider

1. IN JAPAN.
2. IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA.
3. IN LINCOLN, NEBRASKA, USA.

I. a) Gioite al canto mio
b) Pur dicesi
c) O sleep, why dost thou leave me? (Semele)
d) Enjoy the sweet Elysian Groves (Alceste)
II. a) Du bist...
b) ...der Quelle
c) ...elogen
d) ...wesen
e) ...aura

II. a) Ver...
b) Im...
c) Schla...
d) Wo...

a) Norah O...
b) The Bally...
c) My Lagan...
d) Una Wau...

How fair...
To the Chi...
The white Pea...
A Christmas...

John McCormack
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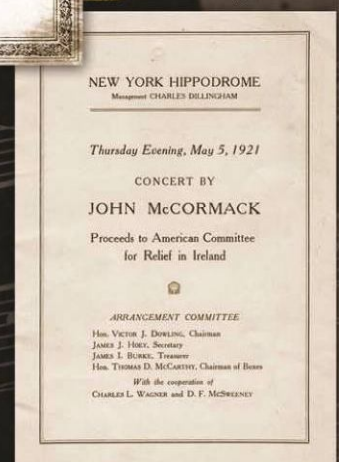
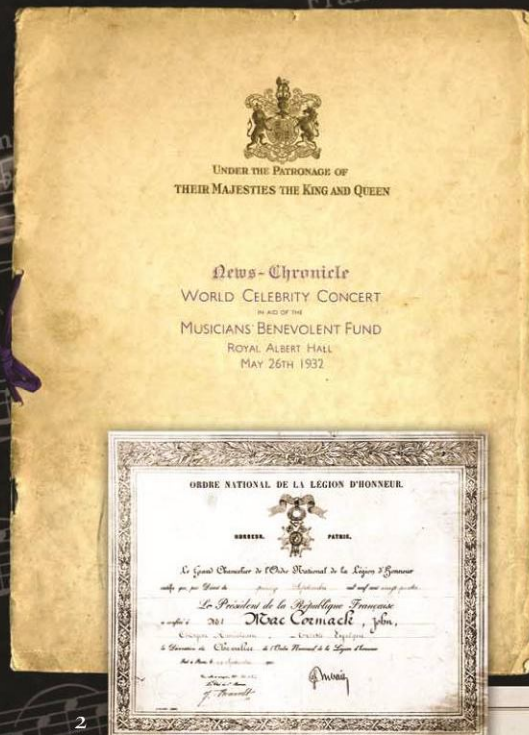
THE EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS

John McCormack was one of the most decorated singers of his time. Among the honours he received was an honorary doctorate of music from the National University of Ireland in 1927. (Leo Whelan painted a celebrated portrait of the tenor in his doctoral robes).

The honour he most cherished was being raised to the Papal Peerage in 1928 by Pope Pius XI for his indefatigable services to charities, an honour all the greater for being made hereditary.

It was as a Papal Count that John McCormack had perhaps his finest moment and certainly his largest live audience. In 1932 the Eucharistic Congress was held in Dublin, concluding with a Pontifical High Mass in Phoenix Park which was attended by an estimated one million people. The tenor, resplendent in his Papal uniform, sang César Franck's 'Panis Angelicus' to the huge congregation, from the steps of the high altar, with the Palestrina Choir conducted by his teacher of old, Vincent O'Brien.

1. WORLD'S CELEBRITY CONCERT AT THE ROYAL ALBERT HALL IN AID OF THE MUSICIANS' BENEVOLENT FUND.
2. AWARD TO MR JOHN MCCORMACK OF THE GRAND CANCELLER OF NATIONAL ORDER OF THE LEGION OF HONOUR FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE FRENCH REPUBLIC.
3. PROGRAMME FOR A BENEFIT CONCERT AT THE NEW YORK HIPPODROME.



THE FILM CAREER

In 1929 McCormack made a feature film 'Song O' My Heart' for Fox in which the nineteen year old Maureen O'Sullivan also made her acting debut. The film was directed by Frank Borzage, a distinguished director of the period. In the role of Sean O'Carolan, McCormack was required only to be himself and his boyish charm is well to the fore. For six weeks work he received what was then the huge sum of \$500,000. The film is notable for the extensive concert sequence in which McCormack sings some of his best loved songs, including 'I hear you calling me', with his faithful accompanist Teddy Schneider at the piano.

Part of the film was shot in Monastrevin, Co. Kildare where by this stage the tenor lived in some style at Moore Abbey.

McCormack subsequently made a guest – and rather portly – appearance in 'Wings of the Morning' (1937) starring Henry Fonda. This was the first British film to be shot in technicolor.

1. MOORE ABBEY.
2. FILM SET OF 'SONG OF MY HEART'.



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Majestic Theatre
Boston
2:30 -- TWICE DAILY -- 8:30
and Sunday Nights at 8:30
WILLIAM FOX presents
JOHN MCCORMACK
in
A Talking and Singing Movietone
Romance
"SONG O' MY HEART"
by Tom Barry
FRANK BORZAGE Production
Songs in the order in which they are sung by
Mr. McCormack in "Song O' My Heart":
THIN YOU'LL REMEMBER ME LOUGH SERENI E CARI
A FAIRY STORY BY THE FIRE LITTLE BOY BLUE
I FEEL YOU TODAY IRELAND, MOTHER IRELAND
KITTY, MY LOVE I HEAR YOU CALLING ME
THE ROSE OF TRALEE A PAIR OF BLUE EYES
All apparatus used in recording and reproducing sound is designed and
manufactured by the Western Electric Company

Program
A. News of the World in sight and sound,
compiled from Fox Movietone News
and Hearst Metrotone News.
B. Intermission 6 Minutes.
C. Song O' My Heart.

The Cast
Eileen
Fergus
Peter
Tad
Ma

THE LATER YEARS

When the pioneering medium of the 'wireless' came to America, McCormack made his radio debut with the Spanish soprano Lucrezia Bori in 1925 and reached out to new audiences. He became a popular radio star, appearing with many other celebrities including Bing Crosby. Some of their radio chats and dialogue has been preserved. He also appeared subsequently on the BBC and appeared in the popular series 'Irish Half Hour'.

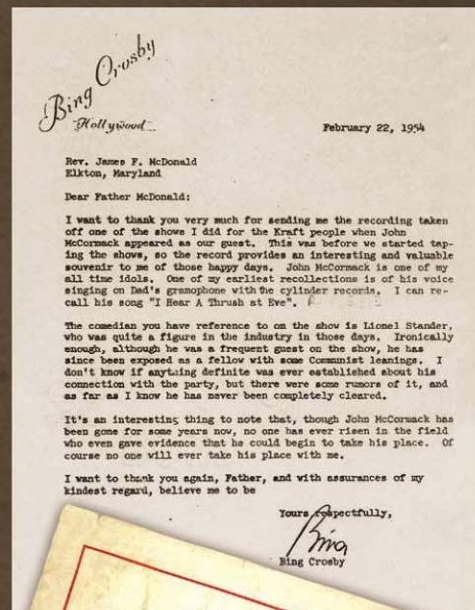
He made a final concert tour in the States in 1937, singing his final concert at Buffalo on March 16. He then made a tour of Britain and Ireland culminating in a tearful farewell concert at the Royal Albert Hall on November 27, 1938. He came out of retirement to sing on behalf of the Red Cross in Britain during the Second World War and continued to make records until 1942, when the development of emphysema made further singing impossible.

He retired initially to the Shelborne Hotel in Dublin, then to his house 'Glena' in Booterstown, Co. Dublin. There he died on the night of September 16, 1945, aged sixty-one. He was buried, according to his wishes, in his Papal uniform, in Dean's Grange Cemetery.

By any reckoning he was one of the greatest singers of the twentieth century, possessing a voice, in his prime, of great purity and a consummate vocal technique. Acclaimed as one of the most versatile singers of his time, his career encompassed both opera and oratorio, and he possessed an unrivalled concert repertoire. No Irish singer, before or since, has achieved such extraordinary popularity or been the subject of such international adulation.

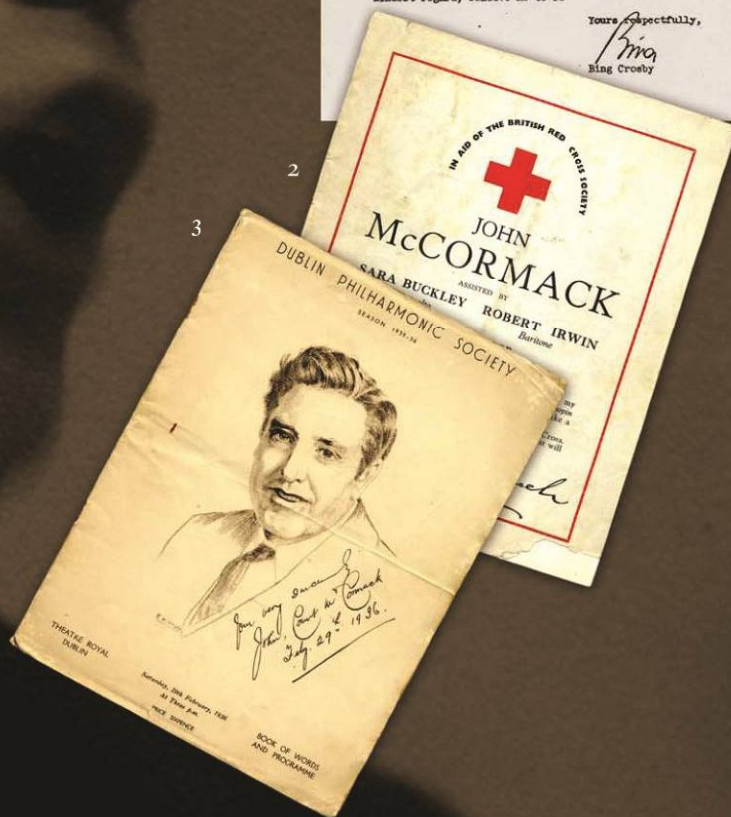
1. LETTER OF BING CROSBY.
2. PROGRAMME FOR A BENEFIT CONCERT FOR THE RED CROSS.
3. PROGRAMME FOR THE DUBLIN PHILHARMONIC SOCIETY, THEATER ROYAL DUBLIN, 1936.

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"THE EVENING NEWS"
28th November 1938
ENTERTAINMENTS PAGE

Great Singer's Farewell

JOHN McCORMACK gave his farewell concert at the Albert Hall yesterday afternoon. The hall was crowded. I have seldom heard this great artist in better voice.

An old German Minnelied and songs by Handel and Hugo Wolf were given with unfailing beauty of tone, and, of course, the Irish songs—especially one or two by Hamilton Harty and Hughes—were delightful. The audience was exceptionally enthusiastic about Cesar Franck's "Panis Angelicus," with organ, piano and 'cello accompaniment.

J. A. F.