

The legendary, and tragic, voice of a generation at war

Contralto Kathleen Ferrier was born 100 years ago. Jessica Duchen celebrates a very British love affair

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Could any British singer ever have been better loved than Kathleen Ferrier? It seems unlikely. The great contralto's centenary falls this year; and 2013 will be the 60th anniversary of her death from breast cancer at the age of only 41. By the time she died, she was said to be the second most popular woman in the country after the then recently crowned Queen.

A near-mythic aura surrounds Ferrier's tale: an unpretentious, fun-loving girl from a modest background, her unlikely rise to stardom and her demise at the height of her powers. Her story is partly echoed by that of another beloved female musician of the UK, the cellist Jacqueline du Pré, whose career was cut short by multiple sclerosis. Du Pré became inextricably associated with the nostalgic, sorrowful strains of the Elgar Cello Concerto; and in the same way, Ferrier's "signature" work – Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* and especially its aria

"Che faro" ("What is life to me without thee?") – seemed, with hindsight, to carry intimations of her own fate.

British success stories always need the popular touch and Ferrier had it to a large degree. She was a down-to-earth Lancashire lass who nicknamed herself Klever Kaff, had an irrepressible sense of humour and loved to sing folk songs such as Blow the Wind Southerly and The Keel Row. She was as celebrated on the radio in Housewives' Choice as she was at the Salzburg Festival. Nobody spoke of "crossover" in those days; it was just that her voice, and what she could do with it, transcended genres. Those who have argued that Ferrier's tragic story outweighed her talent were far off the mark: there was no arguing with her artistry.

According to her mentor, the baritone Roy Henderson, whom she called simply "Prof", her extraordinary, full, warm contralto could be explained in part by an unusual physical characteristic: "One could have shot a fair-sized apple right to the back of the throat without obstruction," he once said, adding that that alone would never have been enough without her hard work, sincerity and strength of character.

Ferrier might have had a ready wit, but her voice was dark indeed; and, rising to fame during World War II, she was a deeply serious singer whose eloquence suited the fearsome times in which she lived. Her colleagues and champions included the conductors Bruno Walter, Malcolm Sargent – who helped launch her career by recommending her to his agents, Ibbes and Tillett – and John Barbirolli, a close friend for whom she sang in hospital days before she died. Benjamin Britten wrote his Spring Symphony, his canticle "Abraham and Isaac", and the opera The Rape of Lucretia for her. Such musicians knew a true great when they saw and heard one. Listen to her recording of Mahler's Das Lied von der Erde, with Walter conducting, and its purity and humanity remain as overpowering as ever.

She excelled in oratorio and song, but was said to be – and claimed to feel, too – rather limited as an operatic actress. Of performing Britten's Lucretia, she declared: "I couldn't believe how difficult it was to do the simplest arm-movements without feeling like a broken-down windmill. And when I finally stabbed myself I fell down like a hard-baked dinner-roll!"

Ferrier was born on 22 April, 1912, in the village of Higher Walton in Lancashire, where her father was a schoolmaster. Her first musical ambitions centred on the piano. She left school at 14 and worked for the Post Office as a telephonist, pursuing music on the side. By the age of 19 she had passed a BBC audition and broadcast as a pianist; a year later, in 1931, she began to take singing lessons.

In 1935 she married Albert Wilson, a bank clerk; the union was short and ended in annulment, but the pair stayed together in name just long enough to indulge in a bet with one another that demanded she should enter the Carlisle Festival music competition in both the piano and singing classes. She won two first prizes; professional engagements soon followed. Her personal life

subsequently took second place, if any place at all; it has been suggested that she might have been "frigid", but it is also true that many female musicians of her day regarded music and marriage as incompatible.

Ferrier rose to fame in works and events that encapsulated powerful emotions for British audiences. Handel's Messiah, Mendelssohn's Elijah and the role of the Angel in Elgar's The Dream of Gerontius all helped to make her name, and her first London recital was a lunchtime concert at the National Gallery in 1942. She was a favourite at the Proms and the Edinburgh Festival. To mark her centenary, EMI is issuing a three-CD set of the recordings she made for the company in 1944 and 1949, including by way of "bonus tracks" early takes of Mahler's Kindertotenlieder that have never previously been released.

Gluck's Orfeo was her last appearance: while she was on stage at the Royal Opera House, part of her left femur disintegrated, the side-effect of a course of radiotherapy for cancer. Her legacy lives on in the Kathleen Ferrier Award, a competition that has boosted the careers of many fine singers; and her recordings preserve a little of her unique magic. Her centenary is the perfect excuse to revisit them.

'Kathleen Ferrier: The Complete EMI Recordings' is out now