

Dame Janet Baker

Rachel Pugh talks to the singer who has just received the Incorporated Society of Music's Distinguished Musician Award about the teachers who set her on the path to success



Dame Janet Baker

difficult to believe that this slim, feisty, trouser-suited woman will this summer celebrate her 75th birthday. Gently spoken, with the clarity of articulation one would expect from the singer who made the role of the Angel in Elgar's *Dream of Gerontius* her own, she allows a sense of humour to show, alongside the determination that drove her career as probably England's most successful mezzo soprano of the 20th century.

She describes herself as a 'very fortunate person indeed' when talking about a musical life which until her retirement at her height in 1982 brought her into close contact with musicians such as Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears and Sir John Barbirolli.

Music was not an obvious choice for the young Janet, born to a policeman and his wife near Doncaster. Music was not played during her wartime upbringing, except for the Proms with Sir Malcolm Sargent. These concerts would transport her into a different world and she would run to the Victorian dresser to 'play' what she heard. She had to wait until she was 12 before the family bought a piano.

The church choir in York was where her music-making started, at the age of nine. Later a member of York Musical Society, she remembers at 13 being surrounded by adults to sing the Brahms German Requiem. 'Even now my hair stands up when I remember it and the feeling of being in the centre of it all, and the profound feeling that I was in the right place.'

School was a mixed blessing. The move to Winteringham School, Grimsby because of her father's work separated her from her friends and made her academic progress difficult; but music was taken seriously, there was the chance to sing in various choirs including a madrigal group and suddenly it dawned on Baker that she might earn her living through music.

She had always excelled in English, but failed to get the requisite qualifications to go to university as her parents had hoped, so she went into Barclays bank and joined Leeds Philharmonic Choir. Having entered Harrogate Music Festival with no expectations and no experience, the 18-year-old Janet not only won the mezzo soprano class but also the rose bowl for the best performer. 'I was chuffed,' she smiles, her eyes twinkling at her lapse into Yorkshire-speak. She began to wonder about taking singing seriously but did not know how.

In a strange way Dame Janet Baker owes her illustrious singing career to the anonymous BBC auditioner who turned her down for radio broadcast work in her early 20s, judging her with a single scrawled word to be 'boring'.

Smiling broadly, the Yorkshire-born soprano recalls: 'I wanted to chuck myself in the Thames. Then I thought "Sod it! I'm not going to be beaten by that!"

'It drove me to set off and find someone to help me to change that judgment. I was obviously thinking too much about technique – you have to have it, of course, but you also need to know what to do with it.'

The young Janet Baker sought out Meriel St Clair, the teacher famed for her inspired

teaching of vocal interpretation and the language of music. Her dynamic teaching (given to the penniless pupil free of charge), together with the lessons in technique Janet was already receiving from Helene Isepp, transformed Baker into the performer who was to inspire Benjamin Britten, as well as gaining her hundreds of BBC broadcasts.

'We used to pore over scores very deeply. That sharpened my wits. I began to let the language of music speak to me,' says Dame Janet. 'The two sides of my performance – the music and the words – came together and I became a complete performer.'

Enjoying the old-fashioned charm of Durrant's Hotel, where she often used to stay when giving recitals at the Wigmore Hall, it is

The unexpected spur to action came after Baker had taken a solo part in a Haydn Mass alongside a professional soprano from London, Ilse Wolf, who said that if Baker ever decided to take singing seriously she should go to her own teacher in London, and handed her a piece of paper with the name Helene Isepp written on it.

This act was to change the course of Baker's life. She mentioned the note she'd been passed to the Leeds Philharmonic Choir conductor Alan Wilkes, who urged her to 'Go for it!' – then he went round to her parents to apologise for his 'reckless' advice. But Baker had the bit between her teeth. The practicalities of the move from York came via a kindly Barclays bank manager who agreed to grant her a transfer to London, in the knowledge that she would leave as soon as her career took off.

Helene Isepp, she says, was vital to this process. 'I had found, first off, a woman whose idea of singing fitted me like a glove. She belonged to a school of teachers in Vienna that taught singing and created sound in a perfectly relaxed and normal way.'

Isepp gave Baker two private lessons a week but insisted that Janet never practised except under the supervision of Ilse Wolf, so that she never developed bad habits.

'I was really being fast-tracked,' she recalls. 'Helly taught me the ideal way of placing sound, not from the vocal cords but just across the middle of the head – very poised, natural and easy. She gave me the technique to last me for 35 years of a very busy career.' The pupil-teacher relationship lasted for Dame Janet's entire career.

The Isepp-St Clair combination soon bore fruit, and following her entry into the Glyndebourne Chorus and the English Opera Group, Baker came to the attention of Britten. Of her first concert with him at Blythburgh Church, Suffolk, she says: 'Ben introduced me to the highest standards. He expected the best from everybody. The fact that I was meeting somebody who expected and trusted me made me think that perhaps I could do it – it meant a lot.'

'Working with him gave you the badge of authority. He understood exactly what performers go through.' She later created the role of Kate in Britten's TV opera *Owen Wingrave*.

It is to Sir John Barbirolli and the Hallé Orchestra that Baker attributes her extensive recording career. She sang her first Angel in *Gerontius* in Manchester with the orchestra under 'Johnny's' baton and made the recording of the work with him that is still regarded as a benchmark 40 years later.

'Every time I sang in *Gerontius* the magic happened. It was always a great moment with Barbirolli. We had an amazing relationship. With a great conductor you go through an

experience in a concert and you are never quite the same again.

'He gave me such freedom. When a special moment was coming up Johnny would look at my face and I would look at his. He would give me all the space to express things in the best possible way.'

The Elgar *Sea Pictures* recording with the LSO was a memorable session. Baker was not enthusiastic about the pieces but knew that Barbirolli was. Both of them were on boxes above the orchestra in the Maida Vale studio: 'All of a sudden the score was all around me. Barbirolli was incredible. I realised there was more to this than met the eye. You just had to look at his face to feel the same way he did.'

She regarded 'Johnny' and his wife Evelyn as great friends and continued to see Lady Barbirolli regularly for lunch right up to her recent death: 'What an amazing privilege to know people like that.' Other conductors like Carlo Maria Giulini inspired her with their humanity and respect for her views: 'Tyrants do not do anything for me.'

She also speaks warmly of the Hallé's current principal conductor Mark Elder, whom she sees as being a worthy successor to Barbirolli. She sees him regularly at the Leeds Piano Competition and values the 'many inspirational conversations' she has had 'with a real renaissance man'.

Among her accompanists she enthuses about Geoffrey Parsons and Gerald Moore, but reserves special praise for Daniel Barenboim, with whom she made several recordings: 'He is one of the greats like Britten who is both a pianist and a conductor. I have real love and respect for him. When playing with him you felt so held.'

These days Baker and her husband Keith lead a quiet life in North London. She occasionally appears on judging panels at the Royal Northern College of Music and for the

Munster Trust and recently acted as presenter of the Hallé's 150th anniversary concert at the Bridgewater Hall in Manchester. Dame Janet is also closely associated with the Foundation For Sports And The Arts and the Elgar Birthplace Foundation.

She has never done much teaching but occasionally gives in-depth help to singers, such as Alice Coote, who are in the process of establishing their career.

'I do not teach in the conventional sense,' explains Baker. 'I want to reveal the avenue and the door to artists. It is up to them to walk through it – you cannot make them. It is about helping them to understand the score completely and how to apply it to themselves internally.'

'You can tell when someone knows what they are doing, even if you do not agree. You cannot help but be convinced. I spend a lot of time over a very small piece of music. Few people are empty enough to learn but it's magical when it happens. I never fail to be amazed to see a person suddenly grow – you can see it happen.'

Baker has no time for master classes, which she sees as being too often concerned with giving the so-called 'master' a platform. She also has criticisms of today's conservatoires, which she considers do not devote sufficient time and guidance to students preparing them for a performing career and in particular fail to give them enough access to répétiteurs.

'The talent is clearly there,' she says. 'When I chaired the jury of last year's Ferrier prize I was pleased with the technical achievements of the singers we heard. But there is a big gulf between them and a finished product.'

'The trouble is that singers go into a career with a shining gloss that is their talent, but when you are talking about a career that lasts 35 years like mine, you have to know what you are doing – that's called craft.'



Distinguished musician: Dame Janet receives the ISM award from the society's president Roger Vignoles