

# The lady vanishes

In the years between the two world wars, Irene Scharrer was practically a household name and one of the brightest stars in the British music firmament. Then suddenly, at the height of her powers, she disappeared from the limelight and was largely forgotten by her once-adoring public. *Jeremy Nicholas* visited Scharrer's granddaughter to try to discover why one of the most important British pianists of the 20th century was consigned to the margins of musical memory

**I**KNEW HER AS GWANOR. I'VE no idea where that came from except she didn't want to be known as granny or grandma.' I am sitting in the wonderfully cluttered kitchen of a Norfolk farm house listening to Sharon Gurney Gough reminisce about Irene Scharrer, her maternal grandmother. One of the finest pianists of her generation, she was arguably the greatest of all the myriad pupils of the revered Tobias Matthay. She made her first recording in 1909, her last in 1933, yet continued playing and lived on until 1971. I have come here to meet Sharon and her husband, former antiquarian bookseller and now author, Simon Gough. They have told me that, as well as her scrapbook of press cuttings, they have several 78rpm discs of Irene, and I'm curious to see if any of them include some of the few known to be missing from APR's superb two-CD set of Scharrer's 'complete' electric and selected acoustic recordings.

Once upon a time, a number of 78s achieved a hallowed evergreen status: Myra Hess playing her arrangements of *Jesu, joy of man's desiring*; the Manchester Children's Choir singing *Nymphs and Shepherds*; the boy treble Ernest Lough in *O for the wings of a dove*. All of them featured regularly on radio record request programmes from the 1930s well into the 1960s. Another of these was of Irene Scharrer playing the Scherzo from Liszt's *Concerto Symphonique No 4*, conducted by Sir Henry Wood. Yet while

Irene Scharrer at the height of her fame



COURTESY OF MALCOLM BINNS



Gough holds a family photo of her grandmother and children Rachel and Ian

Myra Hess remains a familiar name (she was made a Dame of the British Empire in 1941 and was the figurehead for the famous series of wartime concerts at the National Gallery in London) Scharrer has been all but forgotten.

Two years older than Hess, Scharrer was born in London in 1888, the great-granddaughter of Moses Samuel whose modest Liverpool watch-making business would eventually expand into the firm of H Samuel, the biggest jewellery chain in Britain. Though not related (as is sometimes erroneously stated) Hess and Scharrer went to the same school (St Leonard's) and became inseparable, remaining friends and frequent duet partners until Myra's death in 1965. Both won scholarships to the Royal Academy of Music; both studied with Tobias Matthay, their adored 'Uncle Tobs', who exercised an enduring influence on them. (A later recipient of the same Ada Lewis Scholarship and pupil of Matthay was Harriet Cohen, Irene Scharrer's second cousin, who would become the muse and mistress of Arnold Bax.)

In October 1904 Scharrer, still a student, made her debut aged 16 in Bechstein Hall, prompting one critic to write 'Miss Scharrer has but little to learn'. Fifteen months later Henry Wood invited her to appear as soloist in both the Liszt E-flat and Saint-Saëns

Scharrer takes no prisoners when it comes to digital fireworks, and her performances far transcend the bounds of the recording studio

G minor Concertos. (Her friendship with Wood, incidentally, led to her making a total of 41 appearances at the Proms.) 'Her touch,' observed the *Musical Times*, 'was delightfully sympathetic and delicate, and florid passages were rippled off with fascinating clearness and lightness.'

We are able to hear precisely what her playing was like just five years later, for she made the first of her recordings for HMV in July 1909 shortly after her 21st birthday: Chopin's *Black Key Étude* coupled with Mendelssohn's *Bee's Wedding*. In 1912 came her first recording with orchestra: Liszt's *Hungarian Fantasy* (abridged)

accompanied by her close friend Landon Ronald. From then on, Scharrer made regular visits to the recording studio – HMV from 1909 to 1929, switching to Columbia in 1929. In his authoritative booklet essay accompanying APR's set of Scharrer's recordings, Steven Siek quotes a review in the *Musical Standard* (31 October 1914) of a performance of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No 1 with Scharrer and Ronald. 'Her part,' says the review, 'was full of vitality, in fact a veritable tour de force. The technical difficulties were swept away as though they did not exist. The masculine vigour she was able to introduce stamp her as a pianist without a rival amongst the fairer sex.'

Listening to Scharrer with or without orchestra, it is these qualities which impress as much as the astonishing daring and self-confidence. She takes no prisoners when it comes to digital fireworks. These are performances that far transcend the bounds of the studio, making it abundantly clear that, unlike so many of her peers, the red light held no terrors for her. Her playing has the electricity of a live performance and the few smudges occasionally in evidence never impinge on the quality of the musical conception. Among the highlights are the Verdi-Liszt *Rigoletto* paraphrase, Liszt's *Hungarian Rhapsody* No 12, and an outstanding version of Mendelssohn's *Andante and Rondo Capriccioso*. For an example of the generous, singing tone that Matthay's teaching emphasised, just listen to the Intermezzo from Schumann's *Faschingschwank aus Wien* recorded in 1916. It is perhaps in Chopin that we hear Scharrer at her most persuasive and individual: the *Fantaisie-Improptu*, Scherzo No 2 and the nine *Études* of the 24 she recorded between 1912 and 1933. One of the last she made, the G-sharp Minor *Étude in Thirds*, must surely rank among the greatest accounts on disc.

WITHOUT QUESTION, THE oddest title in Irene Scharrer's discography are the *Variations on 'Tipperary'*, at that time (1915) an immensely popular song in the British army. Of the 14 variations published in two sets, she recorded five. The music

is pretty thin gruel. What persuaded her to champion it? The composer of the *'Tipperary'* Variations was Arthur Goodhart (1866-1941), a former housemaster and Precenter of Eton. Just four days after making the recording, on 21 December 1915, Irene married an Eton housemaster. Samuel Gurney Lubbock, 15 years her senior, was a classical scholar and like Goodhart a fellow alumnus of Eton and King's College, Cambridge.

By now she was established as one of the brightest stars of British music (far more of a celebrity than her friend Myra). She had played all over Europe with the likes of Hans Richter and Arthur Nikisch. An advertisement for the first Eastbourne Festival announces the forthcoming appearances of Elgar (who in 1918 had promised Irene the first performance of his Piano Concerto that was never to be), Holst, Bantock and 'Miss Irene Scharrer, the brilliant pianist, [who] will play the Schumann Concerto... Her charming personality is welcome in the concert halls of the world, and she has lately returned from a most successful tour in Scandinavia. Miss Scharrer in private life is Mrs Lubbock, the wife of the well-known housemaster at Eton.'

After her marriage, though her career continued apace, increasingly her family took precedence. The couple's son Ian was born in October 1917, their daughter Rachel in March 1920. (Both went on to pursue careers in the theatre. Under her stage name, Rachel Gurney will be remembered by many as Lady Bellamy, mistress of the house in the popular 1970s television series *Upstairs, Downstairs*.) Nevertheless, we find her making her belated American debut in February 1926 – Beethoven's Fourth under Otto Klemperer in two concerts – followed by two well-received solo recitals. She returned the following year with a sell-out solo recital at New York's Town Hall and a two-piano programme with Myra Hess.

**I**ASK SHARON GOUGH, RACHEL'S daughter, if she knows why her grandmother made no further recordings after 1933. Why did she step out of the spotlight? True, her last public appearance was on 12 June 1958 when, at a concert at the RAM to commemorate the

centenary of Matthay's birth, she played Mozart's Sonata for Two Pianos with Myra Hess, but why did she abandon her career, to all intents and purposes, at the height of her powers? Sharon does not know the answer but reveals a strange parallel between her mother's and grandmother's marriages which may go some way to solving a mystery that has puzzled Scharrer's fans for years.

'My mother married a man called Denys Rhodes. Their marriage was a complete disaster from the beginning. I was a mistake,' says Sharon. 'He disappeared before I was born and went on to marry Margaret Elphinstone, the Queen's cousin [and niece of Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother] and had four children. So mummy brought me up on her own. She was fantastically proud of her mother and thought she was a wonderful musician. It was quite difficult to live up to her.' Irene, too, it transpires was abandoned by her husband. A 15-year-old girl named Anthea Skimming began studying with Irene at Eton and also worked periodically with Matthay in London. She became part of the Matthay circle. Around 1930 when she was 20, Gurney Lubbock seems to have become fascinated by her but then, in September 1932, Anthea married.

Whatever happened between Lubbock and Anthea after this, a scandal ensued. It was successfully covered up, but in 1933 Lubbock left Eton precipitately after 37 years to become an assistant master at an obscure school in Nottinghamshire. Irene made her last recording (the Litolf Scherzo) in October 1933. At almost the same time she relocated to West London – alone. It seems too much of a coincidence that these events were not directly connected to Scharrer's sudden disappearance from the mainstream of British musical life.

'She lived at 61 Addison Road in an enormous house with an enormous garden,' remembers Sharon. 'She broke the house up into flats later on. She was definitely on her own. I used to go to her for Sunday lunch every week without fail. She was tiny. Always had the perfect swept hair and always in a cloud of powder. No make-up, just powder: a very, very good granny.'

Irene and Lubbock never divorced. When he died in 1958, he bequeathed

her nothing, dividing his estate between Ian and Rachel. When Irene died in 1971, her estate was worth more than £100,000. Among her bequests was a substantial sum to the Christian Science Church. 'She was,' Sharon tells me, 'an absolutely passionate Christian Scientist and had lots of close friends like Joyce Grenfell who were Christian Scientists. She never, ever took her children to a doctor – and it really affected their lives. She was obsessed with it.'

Lunch over, Sharon Gough brings down from upstairs a box of 78rpm discs ('We've kept these under the bed') and an ancient scrapbook. Its covers are mouse-chewed and somewhat the worse for wear, but within them are page after pristine page of Irene's own collection of her reviews from pre-teen years to the early 1930s. The box has a number of discs that are cracked or have chunks missing, Among them, though, miraculously whole and undamaged, are five lost test pressings, unissued discs of Irene Scharrer's art: two movements (and part of the finale) of Schumann's Piano Sonata No 2 in G minor, Chopin's Prelude No 23 in F major and two different takes of Schubert's Impromptu in A-flat major dating from 1924, 1926 and 1930 respectively. These have now been issued on APR 6014, further evidence of a great artist unjustly forgotten. ♪

### LISTENING TO IRENE SCHARRER

*Irene Scharrer: The complete electric and selected acoustic recordings* (APR 6010)

*A Matthay Miscellany: Rare and unissued recordings by Tobias Matthay and his pupils* (APR 6014)

[www.aprrecordings.co.uk](http://www.aprrecordings.co.uk)

