

RECOLLECTIONS AND INCIDENTS PERTAINING TO MY LONG

ASSOCIATION WITH JOHN McCORMACK, FAMOUS IRISH TENOR

[by EDWIN SCHNEIDER]

I first met John in Clarence Whitehill's suite in the Blackstone Hotel, Chicago, early in 1912. We were rehearsing a program that Whitehill was to sing in his home town of Independence, Iowa. When John went back to his manager, Charles L. Wagner, he said, "I met your friend, Ed. Schneider. That's the man I want as an accompanist!" Wagner had known me in Chicago and was the first to recommend me to John.

Shortly after that first meeting, I played my first concert with John in Syracuse, New York. I had just finished a tour with the Wagnerian soprano, Mme. Johanna Gadski, and John's program was a somewhat popular affair in comparison. However, I soon realized that I had to do with an innate natural musician who had a tremendous capacity for work, and our programs soon took shape and improved in quality. Handel soon made his appearance in the list of classics, in fact was seldom absent from John's programs. His voice and marvelous breath control were admirably suited to the long sustained phrases of Handel, Mozart, and Bach. "O, Sleep, Why Dost Thou Leave Me" by Handel was a particular favorite of John's, and no one sang it better in my estimation.

When I first mentioned "Brahms" to John, he said, "I thought it was the name of a tooth-wash." Later, when an interviewer asked him, "What is your favorite song?" John unhesitatingly said, "Mainacht" (May Night) by Brahms.

[This transcription exactly duplicates the appearance, line breaks, and pagination of the original typescript. -Ed.]

John made his debut in opera at Covent Garden, October, 1905, in London soon after a short period of study in Italy, scoring an immediate success as Turiddu in "Cavalleria Rusticana," and as Don Ottavio in "Don Giovanni" by Mozart. Critics acclaimed his voice, but decried his ability as an actor.

John dramatized every song he sang, whether it was "Mother Machree," "I Hear you Calling Me," "O, Sleep, Why Dost Thou Leave Me?," "Jeannie With The Light Brown Hair," "Wo find Ich Trost," (Wolf), "To the Children," (Rachmaninoff), etc. He painted the picture vocally—hence his great success with his public. Words meant something to him, and the vocal line was oftentimes a secondary thing, especially in the simpler ballads. his Irish folk songs were of the earth, earthy, and I grew to love them as my very own.

Theoretically, John had very little musical training, though he had learned to read music by the tonic-sol-fa system in college. When his friend, Serge Rachmaninoff, showed him a new composition for tenor, chorus and orchestra, John read the tenor solo part at sight. Rachmaninoff exclaimed, "What! A tenor who can read!"

We spent many hours every day at the piano going through the song literature of the German, French, Italian and Russian masters besides many modern composers.

His one concert in Berlin is outstanding as a perfect recital program: Two old Italian songs, two Handel airs, five Schubert songs, four Wolf songs and two each of Rachmaninoff

and Arnold Bax besides the usual group of Irish folk songs. This concert brought forth this comment from the eminent German critic, Weissman, "It took an Irishman to show us two unknown Schubert songs, 'Der Jungling an der Quelle,' and 'Entzückung an Laura'".

We, John, Lily and myself, were on our way to Salzburg, Austria, in August, 1914. Upon the invitation of Lilli Lehman, John was to sing "Don Ottavio" to Lehman's "Donna Anna," Galski as "Donna Elvira," Geraldine Farrar as "Zerlina" and Antonio Scotti as "Don Giovanni." John had been recommended to Lehman as an outstanding Mozart singer by no less an authority than the famous German conductor, Felix Weingartner, who had directed a performance of said opera in Boston, Massachusetts, in 1913. I was present and, after John's singing of his solo, "Il Mio Tesoro," Weingartner put down his baton and joined in the applause. John's recording of this difficult aria demonstrates his marvelous breath control and florid singing to the nth degree.

we never got to Austria as the first world war was declared the day after a concert in the Kursaal at Ostende in Belgium and we were obliged to return to London and later to the United States for an extended concert tour.

When we entered the war against Germany, John was much sought after in Liberty War Loan Drives and he seldom refused to sing when asked. After a concert in Washington, D.C., he had a short interview with President Wilson at which he offered him his services to entertain the American soldiers in Europe. The President

felt that the breaking point had not yet arrived and that John would be more useful in keeping up the moral here at home. The President said to John, "We need people like you to keep the fountains of sentiment flowing."

He gave his services to the Red Cross and made a tour across the country, giving about twenty concerts, which netted a half million dollars. Everybody connected with this tour donated their services.

The President remarked to Lily McCormack in Boston, where John sang "The Star Spangled Banner," "If I were a king, I would make your husband my court-singer." John had sung at the famous occasion when the President addressed an audience in New York prior to going to Paris Peace Conference.

In 1923 he had a season at Monte Carlo, where he sang in the operas "Tosca," "La Boheme," "Butterfly," "The Magic Flute" and created the tenor role in "La Foire de Sorochinsi" by Moussorgsky. It was that year also he made the acquaintance of Osborne O'Haggin and Jean de Rezhki.

His first and only Berlin concert was in May, 1923. John, McSweeney and I arrived in Berlin about a week before the date set for the concert and stopped at the famous Adlon Hotel on Unter den Linden. John had a suite of rooms and had ordered a piano put in the sitting room. He was assigned a valet who spoke no English. The following is John's attempt at instructions: "Wollen sie mein trunk in die corner exputten! and wollen sie meine (Wasche(this word from me) in die laundry gesenden." "Ja, mein Herr," was the valet's

reply. My friend, Alexander von Fielitz, who had been announced at that moment, roared with laughter.

Although John had never studied German, he knew it from his close study of German Lieder. His marvelous memory and his unhesitating attempts to express himself, soon gave him a working knowledge of this difficult language.

Germany was in the throes of inflation at the time and the mark was practically worthless. His concert, with a sold-out house, netted him about \$250.00.

He gave a dinner at the Adlon to about twenty people, mostly American newsmen and their wives, which totaled over a million and a half marks, in American money about \$75.00. After the concert, the German valet addressed John with "Ja, mein Herr Kammersinger!"

1934 to South Africa; the trip down; the Martins; the nice German lad on his way to Johannesburg, meeting his sister and family in Cologne on our return; Jan Smuts in Capetown; the Van der Byls in Johannesburg; the charming people in Petermaritzburg, etc. The trip back on the Italian liner, "Duillo," the trip down the Rhine; the stop at Weissbaden; Luzerne and the Rachmaninoffs; Heidelberg and Cologne; seeing Goering arrive at the Dom Platz; John's rebuff in the bar of the Excellsior Hotel. John was airing his views of Hitler and his gang when the bartender, a husky blond German, suddenly said in perfect English, "Mr. McCormack, you must be very careful what you say about Hitler in Germany. I am a member

of the Gestapo. I used to serve you at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel in New York." John's amazement knew no bounds. He predicted another war with Germany in five years. He was not wrong. Needless to say, we got out of the country as fast as we could.

In 1926, John signed for a tour of Japan, China, and the Far East. We sailed from Vancouver, B.C., on the "Empress of Asia" early in April, 1926. McSweeney had sailed earlier to prepare the way. John gave three concerts in Shanghai, five at the Imperial Theatre in Tokyo, one in Kyoto, Osaka, Kobe and Nagasaki. Lily and Gwen went on to Hongkong on the "Empress of Asia."

When John heard of the heat in the Phillipines and Japan, he refused to sail for Manila, Singapore and Java. He also cancelled a concert in Peking because of poor steamer accommodations.

Lady Irene Curzon joined the party at Shanghai. Our return trip was interrupted by engine trouble on the "Empress of Australia." She was put in drydock at Nagasaki, where we stayed a week until the good ship "Empress of Asia", with her charming captain, took us on.

In Tokyo, we met Countess Watanabe, who was most gracious, entertaining us at her European house for tea. The Countess spoke English fluently, having been educated at Vassar while her father was Ambassador at Washington. We had dinner at the Marquis Takugawa. John sang for Prince Kuni.

A concert in Kyyoto was most outstanding. The theatre was typically Japanese. In place of the usual parquet seats, the

floor was fenced in squares where the four or five persons sat on the floor Japanese fashion, each still having a lighted [word omitted] to heat water for tea, which they sipped while listening to the concert.

We paid a visit to the famous Yamamoto factory where we saw the collection of Cloisonne vases, gunmetal and the red and black lacquer ware, culture pearls, marvelous ivory carvings, kimonos, etc.

The concerts in Shanghai (three) were held in the Town Hall, which was over a rather smelly market, mostly fish, from the odor. The greater number of the audience were from the International Settlement—American, English, French and Dutch, who were most enthusiastic. Lady Irene Ravensdale joined us here, coming from India.

WAR YEARS:

1917: John was invited to sing at the Fourth of July Celebration at Mt. Vernon at the request of President Wilson. They made the trip down the Potomac in the Presidential yacht, where John had a pleasant chat with Lord Reading, English Ambassador, whom he had admired in his youth as one of the greatest criminal lawyers in England, then Sir Rufus Isaacs. He also chatted freely with the President, who asked him, "Would you pitch your voice differently singing out of doors?" The reply was, "No!" "I'll sing just as I would in a concert hall." The concert grand piano was

hidden from view in a hedge. John was to sing "The Star Spangled Banner," and his accompanist inadvertently played the opening chords of "God Save Ireland." Going back on the yacht, the President confronted John with, "McCormack, did you intentionally have your pianist play 'God Save Ireland'?" To which John replied, "No, Teddy made the slip through nervousness." President Wilson thanked him and said, "I never heard 'The Star Spangled Banner' sung as you sang it! And I thank you from the bottom of my heart." On two other occasions, John sang the National Anthem—the first at the Metropolitan Opera House, New York City, on the eve of Woodrow Wilson's departure to the Peace Conference in Paris and upon his return in Boston. Admiral Wood, retired, was master of ceremonies at a ball and introduced Lily McCormack to President Wilson, who, in his suave manner, said, "Mrs. McCormack, if I were a King, I would make your husband my court singer."

Boston, with its many Irish-American citizens, was always an outstanding show town for a McCormack concert. He usually gave four concerts in a week—two Sunday afternoons and Tuesday and Thursday evening recitals, packing Symphony Hall. His personal friends were numerous, the late Dr. John Taylor Bottomley and family never missed a concert and often entertained him at their Beacon street home. Col. Edward Logan and wife were others.

Arthur Foote, the lovable and eminent musician, wrote

and dedicated several songs to John, and was a great admirer of his singing.

One Saturday upon our arrival at the Copley-Plaza Hotel, John saw Caruso at the news stand and, greeting him in Italian, said, "How is the greatest tenor in the world?" whereupon Caruso replied, "Hello, Mac, since when have you become a bass?" Caruso and McCormack were easily the most popular Victor Red Seal artists, and once John Exceeded the great Italian tenor in the sale of records. When Calvin Childs, the artistic director of the Victor Company, told Caruso that McCormack had been paid more than he, Caruso smilingly replied, "Don't let it happen again, Cal!"

John was recording many popular songs during the first World War, such as "Dear Old Pal of Mine" and "When My Ship Comes Sailing home." In the latter, he does a swing of the octave to B flat and down again pianissimo, which stumped Caruso. His manager told John of Caruso's many attempts to imitate John, but never succeeded, and he would exclaim, "The beast! How does he do it?" Two great tenors, but as different as day and night! As the eminent critic in Berlin put it after John's recital there, "Caruso has a voice of gold and McCormack a voice of silver."

There were many charity concerts given during the war period and McCormack did more than his share of them. one in particular was outstanding, for the benefit of the French tubercular soldier and part to Irish charities, at the great Hippodrome

in New York City. McCormack asked the incomparable Mary Garden to appear on the program, which she gladly did, saying, "I have always had a keen desire to sing to one of your great audiences." John replied, "Well, I thought you needed a little notoriety!"

John offered his services or \$25,000.00 to John Ryan, President of the Anaconda Copper Company and Chairman of the American Red Cross. Ryan said, "We can get all the money we want." "What we need is membership." John suggested a tour of the country, giving concerts in all the large cities from New York to San Francisco. Ryan accepted, and put his private car, "Anaconda," at our disposal from Chicago to the Pacific coast. John gave 22 recitals. Everyone who bought a ticket automatically became a member. The tour netted half a million dollars and added an equal number of members to the Red Cross. Everyone connected with the tour gave their services. Local concert managers cheerfully co-operated. for example, L.E. Behymer, famous Los Angeles impresario, shows with pride a photo of the check \$10,665.00 for the concert given March 18, 1918, at the Shrine Auditorium in that city.

On board the "Anaconda," beside John, were his manager, McSweeney, Teddy Schneider, accompanist, and Lauri Kennedy, cellist. Upon our arrival in Los Angeles, we were met at the station by a group of silent film celebrities—Chaplin, Tommy Meighan, Jack Pickford and his beautiful wife, Olive Thomas. During our stay in the film city, we were shown the phenominon of the wireless telephone at one of the big motion picture studios, the forerunner of the radio. Los Angeles has always been a great fan city of John's and in his

audiences one saw many of the great stars of filmland.

November the 11<sup>th</sup> of that year, John was lunching at the Waldorf-Astoria at 34<sup>th</sup> & Fifth Avenue, where now the Empire State Building stands, when the Armistice was declared and the first World War was over.

1919. John, having declared his intention of becoming an American citizen, April, 1914, swore his allegiance to the United States of America.

1920. John signed with Nevin Tait of Sidney for a tour of Australia in 1921.

He sailed from San Francisco on the S.S. Sonoma June 21<sup>st</sup>, 1921. IN the party were John, Lilly, his wife, James, his brother, Teddy, Cyril, Gwen and Kevin, his adopted son, and their governess, Miss Gayford.

Dennis F. McSweeney had preceded us to Australia to prepare the way. McSweeney was John's sole manager at that time, the Wagner-McSweeney combine being dissolved in 1919 by mutual agreement.

One week to Honolulu, where we spent a day on Waikiki Beach—to John's sorrow, he got a terrible sunburn riding the surf-boards. After an uncomfortable week on board ship, we arrived at the second port of call, Pago Pago, on the Samoan Islands, an American possession, July 4<sup>th</sup>.

The islands were under quarantine and, at first, we were told no one could leave the ship while she was being unloaded of freight. The Governor relented when John said he would sing for the natives at their 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration.

John sang several songs, including the "Star Spangled Banner," and the natives in return entertained us with dancing and singing.

The following week, we arrived at Sidney Heads, the imposing entrance to Sidney harbor. There was considerable feeling against John for having become an American citizen during the war and some of the clubs were closed to him. However, the concerts scheduled for the Town Hall (eleven in one month) were sold out in advance. John had sent out eleven programs from New York without the repetition of one song. The family were housed in a beautiful home on lovely Rosa Bay, one of the many enchanting residential sections about the famous Sidney Harbor.

Seven concerts followed in Melbourne and four in Adelaide, where an unfortunate thing happened to mar the enthusiastic success of John's concerts. After the fourth and last concert there, when John had retired to the artist's room, we heard a faint attempt at the singing of the "King," the British National Anthem. John's keen ear caught the sound and looked out into the nearly empty auditorium to see a small group of people attempting to stage a demonstration against him.

He was told upon arrival at Sidney that it was not customary for a visiting artist to sing the anthem. It was always played at the beginning of the program, either on the organ or piano.

John took this rebuff much to heart and cancelled the rest of the tour upon his return to Sidney. He did, however, give

a benefit and farewell concert in Sidney for his dear friend,  
Mother Xavier, the founder and head of Luvisham Hospital.

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Australia to London-1921. Late in September, we sailed from Sidney on the S.S. Naldera (met Estelle and Louis Dreyfus of Los Angeles) for London via Columbo and Bombay through the Suez Canal, port Said and Marseilles. The trip was uneventful except for a sprained ankle that John sustained between Colombo, Ceylon and Bombay, playing deck tennis.

October of that year, John announced a concert at the Queen's Hall, assisting artist the American pianist, Henri Deering (see Strong's Book).

1921, 1922, 1923. Paris and Monte Carlo. Concerts in Berlin and Prague in May, 1923. The season of 1924 and 1925--concerts in United States with summer season in England, Scotland and Ireland. 1926--Japan and China. April to August. September John was invited to Bohemian Club "Juiks" by his friend, Bill Armsby of Woof-Woof Camp. Amongst the guests at this particular camp were Count Bernadotte of Sweden, the Crown Prince (incognito) and Ossip Gabrilowitch, Russian pianist. At other camps were such celebrities as Tibbett, Elman and Whitehill, Joe Redding, Senator Phelan, etc.

1930. John loved sports of all kinds--he played soccer, football in college and loved crickett. Whenever he happened to vacation in England or on his numerous trips to Australia. The American game of baseball left him cold. He couldn't stand the ragging and heckling of the players by the public. It seemed un-sportsmanlike to him. many were the arguments he and his manager, McSweeney, had, pro and con, while on our many long train journeys, McSweeney being an ardent baseball fan--they never agreed on the merits of the game.

Tennis appealed to John and he played a very good game in spite of his size. He had had some superior coaching while in Australia in 1911 by the then world champion, Maurie McLaughlin, and wherever John happened to spend the summer months, he insisted upon the house rented having a good tennis court on the grounds.

John was also a keen fisherman, although he did not have the patience that it requires. After he had finished his moving picture "Song of My Heart," and had acquired the 125-acre Solano Estate in Hollywood, he heard a great deal about the excitement and thrill of catching swordfish and marlin off the coast of Catalina Island. He bought the finest rod and tackle to be had and with Teddy Schneider started out in quest of the elusive fish. One Jess Skeen operated a fishing boat out of Redondo Beach. His boat was a simple affair, but John and Teddy were both good sailors and Skeen an expert manipulator of his small craft. John had his expensive equipment and Teddy was supplied with the boatman's outfit.

Arriving on the fishing grounds, Teddy got the first strike, much to the disgust of John. Teddy was anxious to turn over the joy of landing the fish to John, but he refused. It was a matter of an hour or more before the 150-pound swordfish was brought to gaff. luck was with them that day and John suddenly spied a black fin gliding through the water. Skeen maneuvered the boat so as to be in line of the oncoming fish. "You've got him," yelled Skeen, and then began the exciting

play--of reeling in and out as the irate fish jumped skyward or plunged to the depths. It took two hours to land that 190-pounder. John had caught it with a nine strand line and was, therefore, eligible for membership to the Catalina Fishing Club.

The fish must be brought to Catalina Island for weighing, etc., afterward, which John refused to do as we had been on the water since 6 A.M. and it was 5 P.M. when we reached the dock at Redondo.

Gwen McCormack, John's lovely daughter, asked to be taken on our next fishing trip. She was 16 at the time. He chartered the same boat with Skeen as the skipper. John warned Skeen to be careful of his speech as he had a habit of using a cuss word in every sentence he spoke. Smilingly, he assured John he would be careful.

Gwen soon got a strike and, while playing the fish, let out such a string of oaths, the like of which astounded even John. Skeen, of course, winked at John and laughed. "They all do it," he said. Not only was Gwen unconscious of what she had said, but quite oblivious to a huge blister in the palm of her hand--she unwittingly had removed her glove just as the fish struck the bait and there was no time to consider gloves or oaths.

undoubtedly catching a swordfish or broad-bill marlin is one of the most thrilling experiences an Angler can enjoy. John had tried many times for a sail fish off the Atlantic Coast of Florida, but failed to make the grade, much to his disgust. We never really had sufficient time nor was the season just right.

Duck hunting and pheasant shooting were other sports that John enjoyed. When he lived at Moore Abbey, Monastereven,

Ireland, he put down a quantity of pheasant eggs to be hatched by hens, which would be ready for the shoot about Christmas time. Rather an expensive sport, but all of John's hobbies were expensive.

The works of art that he collected in New York and London ran into the hundreds of thousands. He was the proud possessor of a Franz Hals (one of his three ambitions). the first was to own a Rolls-Royce motor car, which he soon acquired; the third to win the English "Derby," but never attained.

He had a fine string of race horses in Ireland that his young enthusiastic trainer Rory More-O'Farrell brought to fine form and fettle, winning several important races, both in Ireland and England. This sport of kings cost John in the neighborhood of half a million dollars.

When John bought his first yearling at the Dublin Horse Show in 19\_\_, Lily warned him, "Now John, don't go into it too deep," but, as usual, John plunged and soon had a dozen or so prospective derby winners.

One outstanding filly proved to be a first-class racer. She was named "Golden Lullaby," and won the Oaks Handicap at Ascot, but was disqualified by the judges for boring out at Tottenham Corner, which has been the bug-bear for many a fleet-footer.

John acquired a former Derby winner sold at auction by Lord Astor, "Cragador" by name, paying 12,000 pounds. he was sent to Ireland, proving an unfortunate purchase as he soon developed a cataract on one eye and had to be destroyed.

John took his reverses and losses philosophically with, "Well, we enjoyed it while it lasted." "Come easy, go easy," is the usual answer for those who come by sudden affluence and John was no exception. He never blamed anyone for what he lost. He was generous to a fault and never demanded anything in return for what he freely gave.

[Provenance of this document: Reproduced from the photocopy of the original typescript that was given by Lily McCormack to Jim Sheehan, the prominent New York City McCormack collector and aficionado.]