POEMS BY W. B. YEATS
spoken according to his own directions
by v.c. clinton-baddeley, jill balcon & marjorie westbury
& POEMS FOR SEVERAL VOICES

CONTENTS:
1 LP
1 introduction
SIDE 1
Band 1: An Irish Airmen sees his death
Band 2: I am of Ireland
Band 3: The Rose Tree
Band 4: Imitated from the Japanese
Band 5: Sailing to Byzantium
Band 6: Sweet Dancer
Band 7: The Curse of Cromwell
Band 8: O, but I saw a solemn sight
Band 9: Mad as the mist and snow

SIDE 2
Band 1: Thomas Hardy: Voices from Things Growing in a Churchyard
Band 2: Thomas Hardy: A Lulworth Cove a Century Ago
Band 3: Robert Graves: A Frosty Night
Band 4: C. Day Lewis: Is it far to go?
Band 5: Thomas Hardy: Inscriptions for a Peal of Eight Bells
Band 6: Walter de la Mare: The Ghost
Band 7: Gerard Manley Hopkins: The Leaden Echo and the Golden Echo

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POEMS BY W. B. YEATS
SPOKEN ACCORDING TO HIS OWN DIRECTIONS

By

V. C. CLINTON-BADDELEY, JILL BALCON and MARJORIE WESTBURY

PREFACE

In 1937 the B.B.C. invited W. B. Yeats to arrange four broadcasts of poetry, chosen and directed by himself. I was a reader in the first three of these programmes, and remember very clearly the way Margot Ruddock (a reader in the second, third, and fourth programmes) and I were expected to speak—and to sing, for, although Yeats was totally unmusical, he had a passionate desire to hear his words sung, provided the music was entirely subservient to the writing. Florence Farr or Sarah Allgood might please him with a simple melody of their own invention, but he would have nothing to do with professional composers or professional singers. "Music that wants of us nothing but images that suggest sound, cannot be our music.... such music can but dislocate, wherever there is syntax and elaborate rhythm", he wrote in the preface to "Broadside 1937" and again, "We must be content with butchers and bakers and those few persons who sing from delight in words". Included in this disc are all the Yeats poems that I rehearsed and broadcast for him (there were also several others by other poets) and those which I did in duet with Margot Ruddock; and the tunes to which two of them are sung are the tunes which were used in 1937. In between the poems Yeats tried various instrumental effects—the knucklebones for a poem by F. R. Higgins, a bamboo pipe for some of his own. These effects are not attempted on this disc.

It has been believed that Yeats had eccentric and difficult rules for the reading of poetry. This is untrue. A reading had to be ceremonious—hieratical—to please him: he detested triviality—trivial was his most damning criticism in rehearsal—but all that he really wanted was what any poet ought to want, an expert understanding of the rhythm and an exact observance of the line-endings. "In poetry every word is important", he would say.

Those who do not know the story will be surprised to hear an unfamiliar line at the beginning of "Sailing to Byzantium". At rehearsal I remarked to Yeats that it was difficult to maintain both sense and rhythm in the first line—"That is no country for old men. The young...". It was easier to the eye than the ear. Now, Yeats hated writing for the eye, and to my great surprise he accepted the criticism. "It's the worst piece of syntax I ever wrote", he said, and that evening, meeting me in the lift at Broadcasting House, on our way to the last rehearsal and the broadcast, he showed me a new line scrawled in his book: "Old men should quit a country where the young...". It has never appeared in any edition of his work, but as these recordings are designed as a close reproduction of the broadcasts he himself directed, it is right that the line should (literally) be set on record.

It is the measure of the interest that Yeats took in the speaking of poetry that he should eagerly have altered a line in an already famous poem in order to suit the new medium of broadcasting.

In the 1937 broadcast Margot Ruddock read "The Curse of Cromwell". On this record I have not given this poem to a woman—partly because Yeats reported with pleasure, in a letter to Dorothy Wellesley, that F. R. Higgins had scored a great success with it at a club dinner, and partly because the poem so plainly speaks in the voice of Yeats himself.

The Irish Airmen was Major Robert Gregory, Lady Gregory's son, killed in the 1914 war. Pearse and Connolly were leaders in the 1916 Irish rebellion. 'O, but I saw a solemn sight' is a song in the late play, The King of the Great Clock Tower (1934). V.C.C.B.

POEMS

An Irish Airmen foresees his death (V.C.C.B.); I am of Ireland (M.W. & V.C.C.B.); The Rose Tree (V.C.C.B.); Imitated from the Japanese (V.C.C-B. & M.W.);
Sailing to Byzantium (V.C.C-B.); Sweet Dancer (J.B.); The Curse of Cromwell (V.C.C.B. & J.B.); O, but I saw a solemn sight (V.C.C-B. & M.W.); Mad as the mist and snow (V.C.C.B.).
POEMS FOR SEVERAL VOICES

Read by

JILL BALCON, PAULINE LETTS, CARoline SOUTHAM, MARJORIE WESTBURY, V. C. CLINTON-BADDELEY, JOHN GLEN, CHRISTOPHER HASSALL, CARLETON HOBBS, HARRY HUTCHINSON, C. DAY LEWIS, T. W. SOUTHAM, DIMITRI VETTER, EDGAR A. VETTER.


Only the second poem, ’At Lulworth Cove a Century Ago’, requires an editorial comment. It was written in 1920, the centenary year of Keats’s death, and Thomas Hardy has appended this footnote. “In September 1820 Keats, on his way to Rome, landed one day on the Dorset coast, and composed his sonnet, ’Bright star! would I were steadfast as thou art’. The spot of his landing is judged to have been Lulworth Cove.”

The poems by W. B. Yeats and by Thomas Hardy are published by Macmillan and Co.; the poem by Gerard Manley Hopkins by The Oxford University Press; the poem by Robert Graves by Cassell and Co.; the poem by C. Day Lewis by Jonathan Cape; and the poem by Walter de la Mare by Constable and Co.

The recordings were directed by V. C. CLINTON-BADDELEY and made in England by EDGAR A. VETTER, Summer 1958.

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