

MARY O'HARA - THE COLOURS OF HER LIFE

The Colours of My Life is the title song on Mary O'Hara's latest album. *Yvonne Martins* braved the winter snow to sit by a log fire with Mary O'Hara in her 300-year-old thatched cottage in Wiltshire. She was rewarded with a glimpse of some of the things that colour the singer's life.

Gingerly I picked my way along the narrow snow covered roads of Wiltshire. I had never before driven in snow, or indeed seen any snow-covered countryside except in photographs, but I 'm afraid that its beauty was lost on me as I cautiously edged my way along, expecting any moment to end up in the ditch. I had an appointment to keep. I had obtained a rare interview with Mary O'Hara in her home, and I wasn't sure what to expect. Having survived the dangers of the road, I arrived at the door of Mary O'Hara's cottage. It looked picturesque in its snowy whiteness, and though I felt apprehensive about being late for my appointment, I considered I had the weather as a good excuse. As things turned out, I needn't have worried. Mary's welcome soon put me at ease. She likes people who are late because it makes her feel less guilty about being late herself. It's a struggle for her, she said, to ever be on time for anything - excepting her concerts.

I had gone to some trouble to obtain this interview. Mary O'Hara, I was told, regarded her cottage as private retreat and tried as much as possible to keep her private and public lives separate. "I need the quiet and peace of my cottage to survive. It's as simple as that. Its my escape," she said. She is not one for the glitter and razzmatazz of showbiz. "Some like it but its not for me," she said. "For one thing I do not drink. Another thing, I have an allergy to smoke. After an hour in a smoky atmosphere my eyes start to pain and I 'm bleary-eyed for the next day." She is not anti-smoking, or anti-drinking or, for that matter, anti-anything, as long as people do not expect her to join in. Our conversation had started over a steaming cup of tea in the kitchen. I had needed that after the long road. It took the edge of my nerves. It felt cosy sitting on the high stools in Mary's (old) pine kitchen. It

was the first thing she treated herself to when she bought her cottage two years previously. The cottage too was 300 years old, originally built by people fleeing some plague or other in London. She liked old things more than new. They had more character, she thought. "I think that being surrounded with beautiful things affects the soul. Environment may not determine consciousness, but it certainly must influence it." She looked up at the books sitting on the shelf above her. They were mainly books on cooking, health foods and one on birds. "I like to have some books in every room in the house. I feel that a house is unfurnished without them." There was silence for a while and she looked out the window at the birds nibbling at the apples she had scattered on the snow. "I like acquiring books, even though I know in my heart that I'll never get the time to read all of them. I could not live in a house without books," At one time she used to read a lot, but nowadays except for holiday time, travelling on planes and waiting at airports, her work takes up most of her free time. "Perhaps next week I'll get to read a few books. I'm doing some concerts on the QE2 between Rio and Capetown." Lucky you, I thought, to escape this foul weather. I was distracted for a while. Mary was saying that if a person was surrounded by things of beauty, one was bound to imbibe some of the beauty, if only by the process of osmosis. "I don't know." By now we had taken our mugs of tea with us to the living room, a low-ceilinged room with black beams and a large ancient-looking fireplace. "This is the oven where they used to bake bread," she explained, "they placed the dough in the ashes after they'd scooped out the burning ember." It all looked as if it had plenty of use. When she moved into the house she replaced the carpets with rush matting. "I like rush matting. I also think that it suits an old cottage better than carpets do." It certainly gave the room feeling of simple warmth. The log fire added to this, with the reflection of the flames dancing in the shiny jackets of the

books stacked everywhere. "I haven't got around to sorting out my books properly yet. Only last week did I manage to get my albums and tapes in order. They are more necessary to my work, I suppose." Because she is away so much the ordering of the house is progressing very slowly. "I haven't yet got proper chairs. I don't miss chairs because I like sitting on the floor but last week one of my neighbours complained that he is reluctant to visit me because there is nowhere for him to sit." She can't bear to live with furniture she does not like - even if it may seem useful or necessary for a time. She also has strong likes and dislikes in colours. "I've just completed the traumatic experience of selecting material for my curtains. I'm sure my neighbours are glad the ordeal is over," She has extraordinarily kind and understanding neighbours. They look after her, even when she forgets to do so herself. When she is away they keep an eye on the house, tend to the garden in summer and check the heating in winter. "It's lovely to return home to a warm house with fresh flowers on the table. That's the type they are." When she forgets to cancel the milk delivery order, they do it for her and she finds fresh eggs in the 'fridge when she returns from abroad.

We could have gone on talking about the cottage for a long time and it was obvious that she was enthused. She did not find living in the country lonely. It was the life she preferred. Did she not have a lot of spare time on her hands especially in weather like this when only the foolhardy ventured out of doors? Never. "I have more work than I can cope with, but come rain or snow, I try and get an hour's walk each day. I feel that I have wasted a day if I have not had my walk or if I have not practised playing the harp." On average, she spent about an hour a day playing the harp. I thought that unnecessary but she explained that exercising the fingers was as important and exercising the voice. "People think that there is very little to singing, once a person has got the voice for it, except going up on stage. Concert giving is hard work and needs much strenuous training and preparation. One must also be physically very fit." She exercises for 20 minutes each

morning "Its as much part of my morning ritual as washing my teeth." Practising the harp, learning new songs, exercising her voice - all this is hard work. "It requires discipline and discipline does not come easily to me. It never did."

When I called, Mary O'Hara had just returned from doing a TV show in Norway. She loved it - the people were so friendly and appreciative. But she was already "furiously working" at a Portuguese song for her QE2 concerts. She had driven especially to see a friend in Manchester to make sure all her pronunciations were accurate. She was also preparing songs for a TV programme and for her forthcoming UK and Irish tours. In between all this she was putting in some work on two books she had been commissioned to write. "If I sound like a workaholic, I'm not. I don't know how these things get done, but somehow they always do." "For instance, I try to spend a while each day answering mail. But there are huge gaps in what I manage to deal with. She showed me a basketful of letters unanswered since 1967, "Somehow they got skipped." And she handed me a birthday card that she was meant to have signed and sent to an old granny two years previously. "I'll send it anyway and hope she is well." But for the next few days she must concentrate on programmes for the QE2 concerts. Some concerts were to be with harp only and some with accompanying musicians. She did not know the type of people on board but she would sing in English, German, French, Portuguese and Gaelic. "Surely there'll be someone who'll hear me in his or her own language! she added with a smile. I wondered why the Gaelic. Wasn't it somewhat misplaced on the QE2? "Gaelic for me is a most satisfactory language to sing in. Furthermore, my musical root is in Gaelic song. I try to include one in all my programmes. Most of my 12 albums have Gaelic songs." She said that the broadening of her repertoire had reduced the number of the Gaelic songs she could include in any one programme, but by the same token this resulted in exposing the Gaelic songs to a much wider audience. "I always receive very positive response to the Gaelic songs. Gaelic is beautiful and satisfying language for singing."

Mary O'Hara has sung in all the great halls from the Royal Albert Hall in London to Carnegie Hall in New York.

I asked her about the type of audience that she draws. Were they predominantly Irish? She did not believe they were predominantly Irish or of Irish origin. "Those who analyze such matters tell me that (especially abroad) my audience is composed of about one third of people who are of Irish extraction. Certainly the mail I get suggests that this proportion is correct." She does not consider herself an "ethnic" singer and anyone studying her most recent albums can bear that out. I reminded her of a review I had seen of one of her concerts which classified her audience; as "middle class and well heeled" She cast doubt on the accuracy of that label but she did not really know. She never gave any thought to it. "I don't set out to sing for any particular audience. I sing the songs that I like. If others can share my liking for those songs, I'm happy. It's a kind of sharing. I'd feel dishonest singing a song I could not relate to myself. Anyhow its purely academic because I would not sing it."

I enquired about her autobiography which had become a best seller in the last year. She was pleased that the book had sold so well - almost 200,000 copies according to her manager in London - but somehow she was glad it was now over and done with and she could concentrate on her singing. In the first place she had not wanted to write it at all but was forced by circumstances to do so. "If I had not done so, an unauthorized biography was ready to come on the market. I was advised that the only effective way I could stop it was to get my own out first." In spite of her book's unexpected success, she did not consider herself a writer. "I am a singer who of necessity had to do some writing," she said. But she is currently commissioned to write two more books. Didn't that make her a writer? "No, it didn't."

She admitted that she was a bit apprehensive about the book being filmed. "Yes, its on the cards. But I only claim responsibility for the book. I don't make the film." As she understood it, the film would be based on the book and she had no desire to appear in it personally. Nor did she look forward to seeing the film if and when it was made. "One is naturally apprehensive about

someone else interpreting one's life. I'm even slow to go to see a film made of a book that I've already read and liked. I've built my own images. How much more so of one's own autobiography!" In any case, she pointed out, the project was only in the planning stages yet and her manager knew more about it than she did. But she had given the go ahead. Mary O'Hara did not visualize herself as a "star." I have always earned my living through singing. Her records, even those she made when still a teenager keep on selling. "I believe I'm what they call a steady seller - whatever that means." One of her more recent albums has sold over 500,000 and another over 100,000, but she still prefers her earlier albums of traditional Irish and Scottish songs. She likes the more recent ones too, but the earlier ones are closer to the wellspring of her inspiration. "When I can afford it, I mean to record an album of music of my choice, a non commercial album, my gift to my friends. In fact I've written such a possibility into my latest recording contract."

I asked Mary O'Hara if she was a rich person - an impertinent question to ask in the living room of one's hostess. She looked at me with some surprise and said: "Yes." Then she added thoughtfully: "I still have a mortgage to meet each month. I don't know how long my voice will last and I can't continue singing forever. But I still have my health and my friends. My needs are not many and wants I can control. I'm happy. Yes, I suppose I'm rich."

As I went out into the snow, I too felt rich and, on my return journey home, the slippery roads of Wiltshire received much less of my attention.

