

SECOND THOUGHTS

"Mel" exclaimed my sister Joan, "what in God's name are you writing your autobiography for at your age?" She was right of course. That was 26 years ago. By the age of 42 I had experienced what some might call a 'successful' musical career, an early and happy marriage, early widowhood, spent 12½ years a nun in a Benedictine monastery, and once more I was having another unexpected musical success. I was leading a very busy life flitting between recording studios, Radio and Television stations and concert halls. I was getting tired of all the interviews and answering the same questions over and over, especially about my monastic sojourn. Up till then my life had been full of surprises, chocker block with the unexpected. How does one know that this is not the end? But that's not why I agreed to write my autobiography when publishers came knocking on the door on the heels of a TV interview I did with Russell Harty on the BBC. Jo Lustig, my very capable and persuasive manager of just a year, assured me that once I put it all down in book form, people could refer to the book and stop asking me the same questions repeatedly. I was naïve enough to believe him because I wanted to believe him. And I did not have to lift a finger (or in this case, a pen), for he had the perfect ghost writer for me. I would talk to her now and again between concerts and presto! An autobiography would appear, supposedly written by me. That's how ghosts worked, he said. I signed on the dotted line. In those early trusting days I signed anything presented to me. The publishers paid my manager the money. The manager shared it between the four of us - the ghost, her agent and himself and myself. And I talked to the ghost. And the ghost wrote what she wrote and I did not see it. I was told I had to wait till the book came out. That was how ghosts worked!

I was very unhappy with this procedure but no matter how often I complained, I was told I had to wait. Until one day I spotted in the newspapers an article written by my ghost and it made me very worried. She'd melodramatised what in my view was already quite simply a very dramatic story. I made a decision. The test of authenticity would be the way she treated my stay at Stanbrook. If she got that wrong, then no matter the cost, I would have to write the book myself.

I demanded to see the typed manuscript and, as I suspected, she'd missed the point. There was no way I could append my name to this as my book. I quite understood that it was difficult for an outsider to get inside my mind either during my stay at Stanbrook or during the whole period after my husband's death. I made a decision: I'd write the book myself. As I drove home from a concert in Wales, I visited my old Benedictine monastery

at Stanbrook and they put me on to a lawyer friend of theirs, Michael Rubenstein, a gentle but firm man experienced in legal matters such as I was facing. It took some patient negotiations with my manager and monetary exchanges to get my files back. My husband's letters, photographs of my family, my diaries – the return of everything had to be patiently negotiated. I had learnt a valuable lesson. Never trust others with your life's story. You do the interpretations yourself. This, of course, sowed distrust between myself and Jo Lustig, which was a pity, for he was a competent manager but I could never trust him again and we soon parted company. But now I was obliged to write my own story from scratch and fast too, because the publishers were looking for their money back and I did not have the money to give them. So that's the second reason why I wrote my autobiography at the age of 42. And I have never regretted doing so. I called it *The Scent of the Roses*, a line from a song by the 19th century Irish poet Thomas Moore and a very popular song in the Ireland of my youth. The song is about enduring friendship and love through the thick and thin of life. He wrote the song about his wife, a beautiful woman who, though still young, was dying.

*Like the vase in which roses have once been distilled
You may break, you may shatter the vase, if you will,
But the scent of the roses will hang round it still.*

It was a sentiment with which I could empathise but though the title made a lot of sense to me personally, it could mean little to anyone who did not know the song and its provenance. But I've always liked the song *The Scent of the Roses*. It was the song that Joan Baez told me she treasured most of my early recordings.

That was 27 years ago and I now see that there are advantages to writing one's autobiography in later life. For one thing, the passage of the years gives one, for want of a better word, a sociological perspective. The story becomes as much about one's own times as it is about oneself. Another welcome opportunity is that it enables one to revise one's interpretations of people and of events. I find this particularly true about the memories I have of my own mother. It was only much later in life that I've come to know about her particular problem, which I understand to have been post natal depression – a medical condition almost unheard of in the Ireland of the 1950s. Twenty seven years ago, I was not aware of this and the discovery has tempered my interpretations of what happened in our family when I was growing up. In the light of the passing of time, many past events have taken on new meanings. Which is why I was tempted to call any updated version of my autobiography *Second Thoughts*.

Second Thoughts

Did I feel a great urge to update my autobiography? Not at all! I am now very happily remarried and contentedly retired. Having returned from a six-year stay in Africa recently, I'm fully occupied in catching up on my reading, learning Spanish, writing down all my harp accompaniments and giving talks about *Travels With My Harp*. The Australian playwright, John Misto, has written a play called *Harp on the Willow*. It deals with my monastic sojourn and it had a very successful run in Sydney in 2003. It is planned to give it another run at the Comedy Theatre in Melbourne in 2007 and Malcolm Cooke, the promoter has asked me if I'd consider bringing people up to date on what's been happening in my life since my autobiography came out in 1980. He even very kindly invited me to give a short talk after each performance of the play in Melbourne! Since I've always loved Australia, I of course jumped at the opportunity of another lengthy stay there.

Malaga, Spain 6th January 2007