

THE FACE - Jill Rowbotham meets
MARY O'HARA - Folk singer

If the name Mary O'Hara rings a bell, the recollection could go as far back as 1950s British and Irish radio, television and recordings, or be as recent as '80s TV, concerts and recordings. She has made 21 albums and her work was well known in the US, Britain, Canada, Europe and Australia, where she first toured in the late '50s. But the '60s are largely missing from her curriculum vitae because she had fled the world for a monastery, grief-stricken over the death from cancer of her poet husband, Richard Selig.

The 21-year-old widow was seized by the conviction that God wanted her to live in seclusion and devote herself to him. "The world meant nothing to me without Richard," she says almost 50 years later, sitting cross-legged in a favourite yoga position during a Sydney visit. "I wanted to give myself completely to God. I was so grateful to the Almighty for such profound happiness that had been en grafted to me."

Gratitude, despite the loss of a beloved young husband? "A lot of people have asked me if I was angry with God," she counters. "I don't even know what that question means."

As Sister Miriam, O'Hara embarked on the religious life with total commitment. Even when her health broke down a decade after she joined the closed Benedictine order in Worcestershire's Stanbrook Abbey, she recovered and regrouped, but a recurrence two years later made going on with such a life unthinkable

The nun and her superior and friend, the Abbess, were in no doubt the Almighty's next plan was for her to



head outside and, after a year testing the water there, to resign herself to ordinary life again.

But O'Hara's life has never been run-of-the-mill, not since the nuns at her Dublin boarding school chose her, aged 15, to learn enough of the Irish harp to be able to accompany herself singing in the 1950 annual pageant. After that she went on with lessons. "I felt if people wanted me to continue working I should give them the best I was capable of," she says of the training.

Word spread about her wonderful voice and her musical virtuosity; she was pursued for radio work, then TV and fame followed. Years afterwards she was forcefully reminded of the profound influence on the music scene of that first career when her sister Joan told her as she emerged from the abbey: "The country is crawling with little girls singing and playing the harp."

With tears in her eyes she recalls her welcome back to her professional life as "an enormous surprise" and "quite overwhelming". In 1978 she was the subject of *This is Your Life* and

was thrilled when one of the guests was Joan Baez, someone O'Hara had discovered after she emerged from the abbey, "I had never heard anyone sing so beautifully, doing justice to songs," she says.

Her career was off again and she continued performing and recording. In 1980 she published her story, *The Scent of the Roses*, and remarried in 1985 to a former missionary, Pádraig O'Toole.

She retired from professional singing in 1994 and two years later went with O'Toole to Kenya, where he taught school in Nairobi. They later lived in Dar es Salaam where O'Toole did foreign AID work, which was where Australian playwright John Misto ran them to ground in 1999 after years of searching.

Misto had come across her when his mother thrust O'Hara's book into his hands and insisted he read it. He was captivated by the story and knew it would make a powerful play. Inquiries were fruitless until, as a last attempt, he contacted Stanbrook Abbey where, to his surprise, the nuns agreed to put him in contact with the former sister. Misto talked O'Hara into letting him write a play about her life.

Harp on the Willow was a sell-out in Sydney four years ago and opened in Melbourne earlier this month with Marina Prior in the lead role. "Mary was able to play the harp brilliantly and sing brilliantly: it was like finding a concert pianist who would sing opera," Misto says, explaining O'Hara's unique talent.

There was *one* condition to O'Hara supporting his efforts to capture part of her story: that she should never be expected to see the play. Well-meaning Australian friends who lured her here in 2003 ostensibly to sightsee were disappointed when she wouldn't relent on opening night and go to the theatre with them. "I sat in my hotel and read Patrick White. I love his stuff", she says. (She thinks the book was *The Tree of Man*.) This time she

has agreed to appear at the end of each performance, answer questions and play recordings of her songs. She is highly amused at this new kind of performance, "marching out on stage every night".

O'Hara doesn't sing publicly any more but the recordings are dazzling and it is immediately apparent why reviewers found her talent such an adjectival challenge, resorting to lists of words — exquisite, pure, delicate, haunting, powerful — all failing individually or collectively to capture the combined effect of soprano and harp.

Now she has embarked on a third stage of her career, tackling, at the request of others, the detailed work of writing down her musical arrangements for harp, something she had never needed to do for performing. There is also demand for her as a speaker. In July she will address the European Harp Symposium in Cardiff and the annual Yeats International Summer School in her home town, Sligo.

Despite all this she remains reticent. She says of her work: "I'd rather not do it." Asked why, there is no penetrating analysis. "It's just part of me," she says, "All my singing life I have been in a state of very pleasant surprise that people have wanted to hear me sing."

Pressed, she confesses: "For me the first answer is always *no* to anything anyone asks me." She developed neat ways of avoiding performing. "One of the things I would do in the early days was charge a terribly high fee that they could not afford, then I would go off and play tennis instead.

"If I say yes to something, I do it with 100 per cent effort and because there's that input I would rather get out of it. It may be a lazy streak."

In the end, she felt she had no choice. "The career was in charge of me."