

## INTERNATIONAL, CANADIAN ARTISTS' AND FRIENDS ASSEMBLE FOR FORRESTER TRIBUTE

W. Ian Walker, Arts Reporter- July 25, 2011

On July 25, 2011, internationally beloved contralto, performer and arts professional, *Maureen Forrester* would have been 81 years old. Sadly in June 2010, Maureen passed away at 79 from dementia. Canada's arts' community never had the opportunity to gather together and celebrate *Maureen's life and career* as our national treasure. In Stratford ON, at their annual Stratford Music Festival, the sold-out arts community, the Forrester and Kash family and friends all assembled for a special tribute concert entitled: "A Serenade for Maureen Forrester."

Forrester's daughter, Gina Dineen, the second born of five children, recently spoke to the press on her mother's Canadian and international legacy: "For a woman in the 50's to have a large family and a career and stay in Canada to promote Canadian composers internationally; to wear Canadian fashions in both national and international circle, and later on in her career to be recognized as a vocal artist of distinction for her interpretation of Mahler's music. These things can't be taken for granted."

The tribute included video excerpts of memorable moments from Forrester's career, personal reflections from friends, family and peers including video tributes from Sir Andrew Davis and Zubin Mehta with performances from some of the many talented singers and artists who were *mentored by Forrester including Kimberly Barber, Allyson McHardy, Catherine Robbin, Kristina Szabo, Jean Stilwell and Canada's Prim donna herself (Canada's version of Anna Russell) Mary Lou Fallis*. Sharing their tributes of working with Miss Forrester, was Stratford's legendary choreographer, Brian MacDonald and Karen Kain, international dancer, and former Chairman of the Canada Council. Miss Forrester had a significant impact on youth. Representing the artistic youth in our country were performances by the newly minted ladies chorus of Wilfred Laurier University, *The Maureen Forrester Singers*, and members of the National Youth Orchestra of Canada.

Born in Montreal on July 25, 1930, Forrester sang with nearly every major orchestra in North America, Europe, Asia and the Middle East. She sang and performed with many great *conductors, including the late Bruno Walter, Eugene Ormandy, Hebert von Karajan, Leonard Bernstein, Sir Andrew Davis, and Seiji Ozawa*. Maureen's favourite repertoire to sing were German lieder, oratorios (including the Verdi Requiem) and Mahler.

The late Ken Winters, CBC broadcaster and Globe and Mail arts reporter described Maureen's talents in this manner. "She was a big woman, magnificent on the platform (always gorgeously gowned and coiffed) and charismatic on the operatic stage. She was always present for her audience; your eyes couldn't leave her, and when she sang, neither could your ear. Maureen loved to live and laugh and spend money on beautiful things. Her singing career was major from the outset, stretching five continents and in her prime, she sang as many as 120 concerts a year. Her

voice, arguably an opulent and capacious mezzo-soprano, officially a contralto was famous for Mahler, ideal for Brahms and Dvorak, supple and agile for Bach and Handel, intimate in the most delicate lied and mélodie, simple or rude or funny in folksong or operetta.”

Forrester was made a member of the Canadian Hall of Fame in 1990; Maureen was also the Chairman of the Canada Council from 1983 until 1988, she was also inducted to the Juno Hall of Fame and was made a Companion of the Order of Canada in 1967. Forrester throughout her long career, received the Molson Prize in 1971, the Toronto Arts Award in 1988 and had 29 honorary university doctorates. She was the Chancellor of Wilfred Laurier University, (in Waterloo ON) from 1986 to 1990. This university now holds all of Forrester’s archives.

For this reporter in 1989, Maureen Forrester was one of my mentors, and she made a significant impact on my young career. I was fortunate to look after Maureen on a press junket, being one of our international soloists for duo vocal engagement and me as the publicist looking after two significant choirs, performing the *Verdi Requiem*. Maureen took me out to dinner, as both of us were starving from the afternoon’s press activities. We became friends. Considering her international and *diva-like status*, Maureen was never that way to me or others who had the opportunity to know her, work with her as a teacher or as an arts’ professional.

During our time together, Maureen shared with me that performing the Verdi Requiem was one of her favourite roles to sing! She was the *belle of the ball*, at our closing night party, sharing with me and others her beautiful stories and continuously making us all laugh. During the “meet and greet,” someone would ask Maureen about working with the many of the international conductors whom she had worked. Maureen would say, “Oh working with one conductor is like working with others” keeping these personal memories to herself.

Always thinking about home and her family, during a TV camera set-up for an interview, as the soundman was checking the levels, Maureen described how she had made “this great paella this week” and then went on to explain all of the ingredients to make this dish, until it was time to start the interview.

Dineen stated to the press that like other Canadian international artists such as *Glenn Gould* or *Oscar Peterson* statues have recently been created in their honour and there should be one for Maureen, her mother. “Because she’s up there with those people who established the Canadian Arts scene on a world stage.”

I couldn’t agree with you more Gina, and let’s start the process of coordinating a statute for Maureen to put in significant national space, perhaps somewhere in Ottawa or Toronto. In this gesture, Maureen Forrester will never be forgotten to all of her international fans and dear friends who loved her!